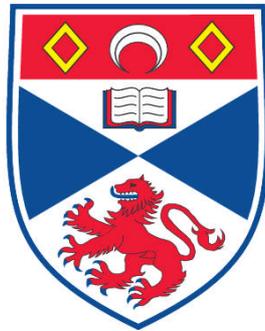


**THE SINGING LASS: A REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF THE POET
MARION ANGUS (1865-1946) IN THE FORM OF AN ACCOUNT OF
HER LIFE AND WORK, AND THREE EXTRACTS FROM *BLACKTHORN*,
A NOVEL**

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Part II

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
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PART II: EXTRACTS FROM THE NOVEL, *BLACKTHORN*

Extract I: 'Don't ever say you love me.' (1900)

Chapter 1 – April, 1899

'Tinker!' – the word spewed oot like a lump o gristle.

Wull tapped wi a stick, the colour and twist o the man's face still vivid in his mind, the insults still ringin in his lugs.

'Be off with you! Guddling fish, snaring rabbits, stealing pheasants. You ... you and your kind.'

A rhythm welled up in Wull's heid. He battered at the rock and dammit he was near as guid as Aleckie Gibson, and Aleckie the best drummer he'd ever had in his band. But the drumstick broke, and the fire needed stokin. He set the twa bits whaur they'd catch and in the burst o flame squinted aboot – little enough room but room enough. A surge o heat: wood-smoke tickled his nose.

There wasnae the chance o a snowflake in hell yon bastard o a game-keeper would smell the trout. No, he'd hae his feet on the mantelpiece, his arse half-wey up the lum and if he wasnae snorin he'd be wonderin why his guid wife had a smile on her face on sic a like nicht.

Wull felt his lip curl and thocht that would hae suited him better than a doff o the cap and a bow o the neck and a beggin o the pardon, sir, 'Just passin through.' He took a troot and a half-loaf frae his pack, thumbed his nose. 'Ach, Will Greig, awa wi ye. Whit if ye did kowtow? Ye still got the best o it.' He turned his collar up and hunkered doon.

Nae moon, nae stars. He spat in the fire and listened tae the gob sizzle. Fire and smoke and mist. Time for a stretch and a rub at the cheeks o his backside – muscle. At least he'd got tae the cave afore the dark and he'd a stack o wood. His fiddle was in its box, happed against the cauld in a fine wool scarf wi a paisley pattern. He wiped a dreep

fae his nose on the back o his hand. Christ, he even smelt like a Tinker...the ither hand as bad. God in Heaven, and him hopin tae see the widow in Ballater the morn.

Ach, if she didnae like his smell, there was plenty that did.

She was different though, that was the very thing. Never looked for nothin. ‘I aye think a fiddler has a guid rhythm’, that was aw she ever came awa wi. If he got up the road early enough the morn, he’d hae a dook in the lochan.

A noise – his heid cocked and his elbow knocked the woodpile. Sticks shifted. He lurched tae catch them afore they tumbled ower the cliff, scratched himsel on the blackthorn.

‘Bugger.’

If that was a cry he just heard – the ins and oots o a campfire tale cam intae his heid, gied him the cauld creeps – but how could he be sure, wi the clatter? He took oot his knife and balanced the hilt on his middle finger. It steadied. And, if there was somethin up there on the moor, what could it be but a wildcat? His knife slashed at the dark. ‘Tyach!’ Yon was mair like a beast searchin for a mate than ane smellin a man’s supper. His finger and thumb ran the length o the blade. He whittled the end o a branch.

Not a sound beyond the scrape, the settlin o the fire and the noise in his lugs when he swallowed. He poked the trout. The skin shrivelled. Underneath was pink and moist and oh my God, the juices that ran in his gullet. His belly rumbled.

Christ, there it was again. He scrambled tae his feet and grabbed a torch frae the fire. ‘Bastard!’ His hand pressed intae his oxter, his back hard against the rock, and a blister raised already. Smoke swirled and lifted and fell. ‘Ye stupid gowk, ye.’ He blew on the sair bit.

Yon was nae spit and hiss o a wildcat, nor the grunt o a deer nor the howl o a wolf nor the wail o a banshee, but the keenin o a lost soul, mair alive than deid. And it was gey close, by Jesus. ‘For Christsake.’ He cupped his hand roond his mooth. ‘Wha’s there?’

Wha is it? Bide whaur ye are, for the love o Christ.’ His words were swallowed by the mist.

Something made him put his hands in front o his face. He ducked... it was just a wraith o smoke frae the fire.

Another cry frae above, sair needin an answer. ‘Is someone there?’

His skin clammy: ‘Jesus Christ...’

‘Is somebody there...?’

‘God Almichty, it’s a lassie.’

‘Help me!’ Wull’s skin like a plucked chicken.

His back hard against the trunk o the birk and the ledge solid under his feet, but the path up the cliff rough at the best o times. ‘Bide whaur ye are.’ He near scraped the linin aff his throat. ‘Bide there, lass – dinnae move an inch. I’ll come and get ye.’ He groped sideways, strainin his lugs aw the while.

Nothin back.

A kick at loose bracken. ‘I’ll find ye. I’ll find ye.’ The ledge inched by – wider here. He groped at the grit and the tilt o the path wi his hands. ‘Bide whaur ye are lass. I’m comin.’ His feet tested stanes afore he trusted his weight and pulled himsel up. For a whilie it was simple enough, and at the first zig-zag he went through the smoke o his wee fire and thanked God for its glimmer.

Up again until the path cleaved through rock and he wedged himsel and leaned his heid back and the face o the cliff rose as far as he could see, though that wasnae far. The blister on his palm had torn so he bit the skin aff and put the raw bit tae his lips for the comfort o his breith. Spurred on, he shouted again. ‘I’m comin, bide whaur ye are.’

Not a word o reply. He shouted again. ‘Are ye there, lass?’

Nothin.

The path was steeper here. The rocks were weat and his hands like anither pair o een. Chill in the air, awa frae the fire. A touch o breeze let the mist think it micht be rain. His hair stuck against his brow. He panted, shouted 'I'm near there,' but his boot slipped on scree and he fell against a boulder, winded. The force, and his weight, made it shift. The legs went frae under him. Slidin on his back, he yelled, his hand gropin for heather, roots, something that would haud. A sick feelin in his belly... but that was it.

Thank God, though he'd be black and blue the morn.

A mewl frae up above and that was something, at least she was still there, and still alive. 'That was gey close', he shouted.

The path lost now, but the sound o water and a surface o thick moss, like fur under his hand. Wi the lie o the land in his heid, he kent he was near there, whaur the peat moor hung ower the tap o the cliff. He clawed and heaved himsel up. Weet grass took the edge aff the pain in his hand. He peered intae the grey, this wey and that, searchin for a wey. 'I'll find ye now,' he yelled. 'Dinnae worry lass.'

Nae reply. 'Are ye there? For the love o God, lassie, are ye there?'

Just the sound o his ain breith.

'Speak tae me!' Nae even a whimper. 'Are ye hurt? I cannae see ye, lassie. For the love o God, whaur are ye?'

'I'm here, I'm over here. I can't tell you more than that,' she cried.

Fair enough, Wull thocht, and turned himsel tae her voice, that had gumption in it. That'd see her through. 'Dinnae get yersel in a fankle, noo.'

If he couldnae trust his een, a man had ither senses. Wull breithed mist intae his lungs and stilled himsel, like a cat on the prowl.

'This way. Over here.' The sound o hands – gloves on – clappin thegither. Wull minded the great granite boulder. That was whaur a bodie would stop, get their back

against that. He had her. His voice sure now. ‘Hing in there lass, ye’ll be all richt. I’m near enough.’

‘I can’t see a thing!’

The peatbog sucked at his boots. ‘Ye’ll be at the stane?’

Quick as a flash. ‘How d’you know that?’

Animal fear, he could sniff it. And why would that surprise him, that a lassie might wonder what kind o a man was oot on the hills on a nicht like this? ‘Dinnae worry, lass, I’m nae beast nor elf, just a man on the road, like yersel, caught in the mist afore I got doon the track.’

He heard a sniff and kent enough aboot women tae think a wee greet could be a guid thing. He thocht he heard the teeth chatterin. By God he was near. ‘I’m as real as you are but maybe no as cauld. Just bide whaur ye are, lass. Ye’ll be fine.’ He edged forward. Thank Christ, there it was, the boulder. A man’s feet were surer, when he’d somethin tae aim for. ‘I’ve near as dammit got ye.’

‘I see you.’ Ae airm waved, but the ither bade on the stane.

Like a wraith, she was, in the mist.

‘I see you. I’m here, I’m here.’

She clung tae him, but he could stand that, her body against his. Taller than he’d had in his heid, skinny, and nae sae young, thirty if she was a day. Dressed the wey toffs dress for the hills – a jaiket that covered her backside, a waistcoat and tie like a man’s. A silly-like hat, but ye couldnae fault her boots.

She pulled awa like she’d just minded somethin. The heid went doon again.

Wull stood back, respectful. He saw the glaur on his troosers, caked half-wey up his legs. ‘Sorry, miss, for the gutters.’

She was tryin tae get hersel thegither. ‘No, no. It’s just... I’m sorry, I’m not usually...’

‘Was there ither... some mair... onie mair o ye, lass?’ It could hae been a shak or a nod or maybe she just didnae understand him. He put on his best accent. ‘Did you lose yer party?’ He touched her arm.

‘My companion...’ she said.

‘Ye had a companion?’

‘Well, yes. But he... he left.’

‘Left ye on yer ain?’

‘No, I mean yes. But not like that. He didn’t leave me. It was me. I wanted to walk on my own.’

‘By yersel? In the mist?’

‘There was no sign of it then.’ Her chin went up. ‘I’m quite used to the hills, you know. I know what to do. I looked for shelter.’

Her arms wrapped ticht across her chest.

‘Just ... it came down so fast.’

‘You’re cauld.’

‘Yes.’

‘We’ll better get back. The mist’ll clear in the mornin, never fear.’

‘I didn’t expect, you know, when I shouted ... I didn’t think anyone would hear.’

Her voice posh, but nae airs and graces. ‘Ye gied me a richt fleg.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Naw, naw. I dinnae mean nuthin.’

‘And now there are two of us lost?’

‘I’m nae lost.’

‘You can get us off the hill?’

Wull put his palm up. ‘Aye, but haud on. In the mornin.’

‘But I could get off myself, in the morning ... it can’t be too far, surely, the glen?’

‘Aye, and dae ye ken whit glen that would that be?’

She half turned her heid, but said nothin. Wull went tae put an airm ower her shoulder but thocht the better o it. ‘Dinnae worry, I’ll look aifter ye, Miss.’

‘We’ll freeze.’

‘Na, nae the nicht. It’s nae winter. And I’ve a wee fire – and I kept a bittie trout for yer supper.’

‘You’ve food?’

‘I dae.’

She tucked her hair ahent her ears.

‘Everything’s so wet.’

‘Just mist, and that’ll clear by the dawn. And I’ve a shelter, a place tae rest yer heid, if ye’re nae that fussy. Ye comin?’

‘How far?’

‘Nae that far. I’ll lead ye doon.’

‘The cliff?’

‘Just a wee bittie.’

‘In the dark?’

‘Look, lass. I’m nae bidin here and I’m nae gaein doon nae glen. Ye can follow me if ye want and if ye dinnae, well, ye’ll likely hae yer ain reasons. I’ll nae force ye. But I’m gaein back.’

‘I’ll come. I’m coming. Of course I will.’

‘Ye dinnae sleepwalk, dae ye?’

‘No.’

‘That’s lucky.’

‘There,’ he said. ‘ye’ve done it. Sort yersel in there.’ He pushed her intae the cave and turned his back and let his breith oot slow – quiet so she wouldnae hear – waited for his hert tae calm doon. She stumbled ahent him. ‘Can I have... I’ll need my skirt back.’

‘Aye,’ he said. ‘Ye will that, lass. Here, tak it – though it’s a fine enough bit tweed.’ He thrust it at her. ‘Just mind and dinnae let yer feet trip ower it again, for ye could brak yer neck next time.’

‘You saved my life.’

‘Aye well, that’s as may be, but whit we need dae is sort oorselves, nae blether on about what’s by.’ It wasnae easy for her tae pull the skirt up ower her arse. ‘Listen, there’s a bittie sack somewey in the back there,’ he said. ‘Put that ower yer shoulders.’

‘You’re very kind.’ She hunkered doon and fumbled. ‘I’m sorry, I can’t see a thing in here.’

‘It’s on the flair. Just grope, lass. Or dae ye nae ken whit a bittie sack feels like?’ He knelt doon. ‘Ach, the fire’ll catch in twa ticks. Then ye’ll see as much as ye need.’ And nae mair, he hoped. He leaned ower the embers, picked up a branch and blew until it glowed. A bittie bark touched against it, a curl o smoke. He set the tinder doon and laid a couple twigs on the fire.

‘I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to thank you ...’

Smoke, sparks. He blew again, concentrated. Mair twigs balanced against ane anither. Sittin back on his heels, he watched the flames lick at the sticks. Fires needed coaxed, and he was guid at that. And oh, the pleasure when he watched it draw in air tae feed itsel and how the twigs would crackle and there’d be heat enough tae roast a rabbit on a spit and licht enough tae see the flesh tear as ye pulled the legs apart.

He’d been settin fires since he was a bairn, that had been his job, awa back in the cottar hoose at Dun. He minded his wee wooden stool – the ane his faither made – up

against the fender, the hiss and spit o cheap coal, flames lickin at the kettle on its chain, the smell o mutton fat candles, and the rustle o the chaff when Cissy crawled intae the box bed wi the wee anes.

‘You’re very patient.’

‘Aye.’ Handsome, she was, now he’d a richt deek.

‘I don’t know how to thank you. What to say.’

The sack folded across her chest like a plaid, her hands stretched tae the flames.

‘Dinnae sae nothin then. Just for God’s sake keep that skirt awa frae the fire.’

She pulled the hem in aboot. ‘I’ll be careful. I will.’

Awkward, she was. ‘Ye can sit yersel doon.’

‘I can hardly believe this is happening. I thought I was going to die.’

‘Ach, ye’d likely hae been fine.’

‘I’ll be all right now, I know that. But up there on the moor I remembered a dream I had once – there was no colour in it. Everything was black or grey and I thought I’d suffocate.’

Her lips moved the wey a teacher’s did when they were tellin ye something they thocht ye should ken.

‘I couldn’t get it out of my mind.’

Gie the woman her due, that was a sair tumble she took and here she was on her feet and not a girn. His burn yarked. He gripped his left hand roond his richt wrist and tried tae straighten the fingers. ‘Ye hurt yersel gey bad, when ye fell?’

‘No, no.’ Her elbow got a wee rub. ‘Nothing much wrong. It’s not broken.’

The pair o them stared at the fire.

‘Sit ye doon. I’ll nae bite.’ Wull cleared a flat stane o debris and set his water can on tae boil. He cut a door-stepper frae the breid, held it tae the fire on a stick. The flesh o the fish had shrunk. ‘It’ll be gey smoked.’ He sniffed it. ‘And mind for the wee banes.’

Her fingers still clumsy wi the cauld.

‘It’s so kind of you.’

‘A full belly maks a stiff back.’

‘And what about you?’

‘I’ve had mine. Get it doon ye.’ Wull couldnae help but see the wey she held her airm.

‘This is good. I didnae realise how hungry I was.’

He thocht about what she’d said. Bubbles rose in the can. He took his time and unwrapped a bittie paper, threw tea-leaves in the water.

‘Will you let the tea mash?’

He gied himsel a meenit. ‘Ye mean infuse, dae ye nae?’

A wee smile. ‘Aye,’ she said. “‘infuse” is guid enough if ye like yer tea peelywally.’

Her lilt raivelled him but he kept his heid doon. ‘Ye want it stewed, then?’

‘Aye,’ she was sayin, “‘infuse” is definitely a pale word.’

‘Ye want yer tea black?’

‘Aye.’

‘That’s lucky tae, then.’ Wull said. ‘I dinnae hae nae milk.’

‘It’ll be the best tea I ever drank.’ She looked up tae the sky, like a wee lassie would. ‘Thank you, God!’ A break in her voice. ‘But if it hadn’t been for you...’

‘Ach, it’s just yer luck – bad then guid.’

The last bit o fish, set on the last bit o breid, and savoured.

‘Yes, aye. I’m so lucky you were here. I’d never hae found this cave.’

‘Naw.’

‘Did you find it by yoursel?’

‘Naw.’

‘Did someone...somebody bring you here?’

‘Aye.’

Lickin the taste o fish off her fingers: ‘Another Tinker?’

He broke a twig and set the bits on the fire.

‘You are a Tinker, aren’t you?’

His hands still busy. ‘And what if I was?’

‘Oh, I didn’t mean... please don’t think – it’s just, well, there was a Tinker woman I knew. I kent. Camped in the woods near Arbroath, every summer. Sold clothes pegs, wooden chrysanthemums. Told fortunes, that kind o thing. I was really fond o Nellie. Maybe you kent her?’

He checked the colour o the brew.

‘Sometimes when she spoke ... her voice, it came through her somehow, from somewhere else.’

The conyach in it, for ever in his ears.

Somebody has tae dae it, laddie. Somebody has tae walk the land. And nae for the smell o wild garlic, the bloom o heather, nae for the first bonnie bank o snaw. Nae for nuthin but that the land cries oot for the tread o feet – the wey a woman cries for her skin tae be touched. But God help ye, laddie, if ye’ve heard the cry. She’s a wild mistress, the land.

He’d heeded the cry, had he nae?

He’d left his hame and walked the tracks o his mither’s folk, and if life was hard he hardened wi it. Sometimes the land lent him power – strength frae the summit ridge – sometimes he drank comfort frae a burn and that put a sparkle in his ee. Sometimes paths hurried by under his feet and found him shelter or a clump o blaeberrys or a kestrel’s nest

wi fower eggs or a bonnie bank o thyme. The land kent his feet like his fiddle kent the rhythm o his fingers. But, ae thing he'd learned – he gied the tea a stir and tapped the spoon on the edge o the can – Tinkers were just like settled folk, guid and bad, and every shade in atween. Loyalty tae their ain afore the likes o him: a blue buck born and a blue buck till he deid.

‘Painted pictures with her words, that’s what Nellie did.’

‘Here.’ He thrust the tea can at her. Christ, whit was he thinkin? He should hae asked her name. ‘I’ve camped here since I was a laddie.’

‘It’s a fine shelter.’

‘Guid enough for the last wolf ever seen in Scotland.’

‘Really!’ She minded nae tae burn hersel, sipped frae the can like it was china.

‘This is how Nellie used tae mak tea.’

‘Nellie gied ye tea?’

‘I kent Nellie from when I was – what, fourteen, maybe? I used tae get away from the house, when I could. I’d been ill you see – scarlatina. It damaged my heart. When I began to get better the doctors said I’d to... tae get as much fresh air as I could, and exercise. So my parents just... well, I’d a lot of freedom, actually, more than most of – maist o my friends.’

Maybe he’d tell her. But first things first. The kindlin wouldnae last the night. He’d better see her settled afore the fire went oot.

‘I used tae meet Nellie in the woods – she was somebody I could talk tae.’ She passed the can back, for him tae share. ‘It was when you said you’d a bed, I wondered then if ...’

‘Ye’ll nae mind sharin yer bed wi a Tinker man, then?’

Taen aback, but she laughed and shook her heid. ‘No, it’s all right. I mean, I wouldnae take your bed.’

‘Naw, lass, it’s me. I’m just haein a bit o fun. Ye can see yersel it’s nae muckle o a bed, but ye’re welcome tae what there is. He lit a cigarette from the fire.

She peered intae the mist. ‘I don’t suppose... I dinnae...’ Wavin a hand towards the cigarette: ‘Could you spare one?’

‘You smoke?’

‘Just one o my bad habits.’ He held the packet open for her, offered a licht. She steadied his hand. ‘You know... I’m wonderin ... I don’t – dinnae mean tae pry, but... may I ask ye somethin?’ Wull shrugged. ‘Was that a violin case in the cave?’

‘Could be.’

‘You play?’

‘I micht.’

‘Actually, I’m wondering... I think I ken who you are.’ She took a draw and held the smoke in her lungs.

‘You hae the advantage, miss.’

‘My name’s Marion.’

He inclined his heid.

‘I’m from Arbroath. If I’m right, I ken your sister. Cissy Greig? She was at school wi me. We were friends. When we were ... you know, a lang time ago now, I suppose. And I heard you play, once.’

‘Your faither’s the minister then, at Erskine Kirk?’

She nodded. The pair o them drew on their fags.

Wull threw his butt on the fire. ‘Hae ye seen Cissy?’

‘We lost touch.’ She pulled the sack tichter.

‘I hinnae seen her for a lang time.’ Wull roused himsel. He said she must be fair forfochen, and it wasnae gettin nae warmer. She should try and get some sleep, for they’d start at the dawnin. In the shelter o the cave he scraped the bracken thegither, made a

cushion and she sat on that, her back against the rock. He heard her shift and stretch and shift again and aifter a while she said would he nae just come in, for she could see the fire gaein doon and was worried sick he'd catch his death o cauld, for how would she get back up that cliff by hersel?

'Ah weel,' he said, 'ye've somethin there' and squeezed in and the only wey his airm would fit was roond her back. She leaned forward tae mak room and it felt queer tae Wull but she settled, heid on his shoulder. He couldnae tell if she was sleepin or no, but there was nuthin mair said, and that was a relief.

He dreamed o a lassie dancin: clockwise and back, clockwise and back, her feet makin a pattern on the earth.

The fire was deid when he waukened up. Nae colour, nae inside, nae ootside. Chilled tae the bone, his belly empty, and the only thing tae dae was snuggle up and let her hair tickle his cheek. He put a hand across her chest.

It rose and fell, rose and fell.

He tried tae think about the morn, but the smell o her ... He thocht she spoke in her sleep and strained his lugs but couldnae catch nuthin. He happed her wi the sack, and dozed again, and this time it was her, he kent it was her, and she was in the sea. She sank and surfaced and sank again, pulled further and further awa by the tide. Her skin that white she micht hae been a reflection o the moon, and not a splash nor a ripple nor a wave on the surface o the water.

First licht, her weight against him. A mop o hair, she had, but short, fine and frizzy, and he'd aye liked a lassie wi lang black straicht hair. But there was somethin about the wey the cut showed aff her neck – smooth and thin, like the neck o his fiddle. A comely curve tae her bosom. He shook his heid at the sicht o the screive and the swellin on her arm and wished he'd a root o comfrey. The skin o his ain palm raw.

Her airm limp and easy lifted, he slipped frae underneath.

Rays o the sun teased the horizon. An air current flurried the ashes. Mist lay in the hollows, thicker at the Linn and whaur the river wound tae Strathmore. Clumps o woodland poked through banks o silver grey. He heard her stir but peyed nae heed, just diddled a tune until the words came.

*True Thomas lay o'er grassy bank,
And he beheld a lady gay,
A lady that was brisk and bold
Cam ridin o'er the fernie brae.*

Half wey through she joined in. He stopped.

'I like that ballad. It's one o my favourites,' she said.

Lay doon yer heid upon my knee

Her singin voice timid, like she was feart tae let it oot. Mind, yon wasnae a sang ye'd expect a wifie like her tae sing.

*And see ye not that bonnie road
That winds aboot the fairnie brae?
That is the road tae fair Elfland,
Whaur you and I this nicht maun gae.*

Wull felt his blood quicken. 'Ye like the view, then?' The pair o them surveyed the view.

She shook her heid, but slow, and he kent she meant aye, it was that bonnie she couldnae believe it was real. A cock cried in the glen.

'No words could ever do this justice.'

'Aye, the licht. This time o day... there's nae much can beat it.'

They heard a noise and looked up. Twa golden eagles, wings heavy in the calm air. She put her neck back and followed their spiral.

Grey-blue her een were, and a fleck in ane o them, like his mither's. Wull scarted lichen frae the birk.

'How it's twisted, that little birch!' She put her airms roond the trunk. 'How can it grow here, Wull Greig, frae that tiny wee crack in the rock?'

‘Gey lang roots, if ye ask me.’

‘And look! The bush!’

He thocht at first it was the sun on dew, but it was floers – nae oot, just ticht buds, a tinge o green on white, and her standin there, mesmerised.

‘Like seedpearls,’ she said and though she’d been born and bred tae the high life, there was hert there tae.

‘Mind yersel, lassie! It’ll rip ye tae bits.’

She pulled back. ‘I’d love tae come back here some day.’

‘We can burn the bracken.’ Wull gathared up handfuls. ‘It’ll nae last lang but ...’

‘I aye wanted to – tae be free, like Nellie.’

‘There’s ups and doons on every path, lass.’

‘And sing like Cissy.’

‘She could sing, richt enough.’

‘And look at me. Here I am. Cannae even walk on the hills without gettin lost.’

Wull lit her a fag. ‘You werenae that far aff the path.’

‘The truth is,’ she said, ‘I was well and truly lost. Even afore the mist cam doon.’

Wispy hairs on the back o her neck.

‘Mama always – aye says, if there’s a richt and a wrong path, I’ll tak the wrong one.’

‘There’s nae sic a thing as a *wrong path*.’

‘I’ve found a few.’

‘It’s nae whaur ye’ve been, it’s whaur ye gae that matters. A man follaes his ain road, he’ll get whaur he’s meant tae be.’

Chapter 2 – July, 1899

His whistle gey flat. The smell o the meadow. The slant o sun, dew drops on the grass – bronze and gold and silver and grey grass, broon and yellow grass, every stem tipped wi red: life burstin through. A clover at hand, and he sucked the heid for milk. His fingers worried at his lucky penny – a young queen wi a bun on it, but she didnae look like that noo. The tunes it tapped against his leg echoes o whit his fiddle had picked up ower the years. He drifted in the hum o bees: the sob o the sea. Crows skraiked, swooped and flapped at a buzzard. Shouted words: a guffaw. Laughter, back and fore. Folk on the road already. He sat up. His penny a brassy taste against his lips before it flicked through the air. He caught it on the back o his hand.

Heids it was. A grand day for the beach.

A blind man could hae found his wey by the tramp o feet, by the chatter, the yells and whoops, by the barkin o farm dogs that didnae ken sic bustle was tae be expected on a holiday. Hooves and wheels on gravel. Near every five minutes, them treadin the road made wey for cairts and carriages, sized up the horses as they passed. Wifies checked their swollen ankles, bairns shouted cheek and got a clip on the lug for it. Three men caught up wi Wull and asked whaur he'd left his fiddle? Their stride matched his, so the fower o them traivalled the road thegither, tearin tae bits the damp squib that had been the boxin match in the public hall the nicht afore. Ane swore on the bible it was rigged. There micht he been an argie-bargie, but ach, it was ower bonnie a day and the further they got frae Arbroath, the mair their minds turned tae the fear that the fish at Ethiehaven would be flegged awa by the boats.

The gaggle o folk split when some took the road for Ethiehaven: further on again, for Corbie Knowe. Mill-lassies on the back o a works cairt chortled and trailed the ends o their shawls for Wull. He took a breather. The sweep o the fields, the flattened curve o the bay, the castle ruins on a hummock o a hill.

She'd mentioned the castle.

Grey belches against blue and everybody lookin the same wey, at a train on the line. A pony bristled, reared. Wull ran and caught the bridle: held it ticht. The pony shivered.

The faither o the young lad on its back huffed and puffed along the road, offered his hand. 'Thank ye kindly, sir. I see ye've a wey wi the horses.'

Wull tipped his heid. 'Bloody nuisance, that station,' the man said. 'Bloody noise and bloody dirt and half the folk in the bloody country will be at Lunan the day.'

Wull scraped a match and lit his fag, then followed the man's wave.

'Ye wouldnae need tae lose somebody on the sands. Ye'd never find them.'

'Ye would not.' A crush o folk and that micht just be a blue jaiket.

'We've come doon frae Friockheim,' the man said. 'Hae ye come far yersel?'

'I have that,' Wull said.

He picked his wey amongst the trees and the crowds, scannin for a shape or a face or a glimpse o hair cut blunt against a neck, his ears cocked for a low voice, a tongue that didnae prattle. At the ruins, the steep bank by the river: swathes o green and gold and blue and sky reflected in sea. He shaded his een. Clouds were banked on the horizon. The Lunan Water, sneakin frae the reeds, cut the beach in half, a line o white spume whaur it pushed against the tide. The links o Lunan, ruffled and folded, studded wi reed beds and whin and secrets. Couch and lyme grass tussocks, clumps o sea grass. A foreign rigged schooner moored in the bay, its masts sharp. Barques, fishin boats, rowin boats, punts. And beyond the beach, south: a rocky shore, cliffs, a harbour. Beyond the beach, north: cliffs that crumbled intae the sea.

The castle ruins were battered and scourged by men and time and winds and green algae. His fingers probed the grain o the sandstane, the dimples, the honeycombs, traced the curves o harder veins. He pulled in the sea air tae his lungs.

'My sisters...some friends,' she'd said. 'A picnic.'

'Aye?' he'd said, and the words were there on the tip o his tongue but his lips wouldnae let them through. He'd stared at the trees and she'd taen an age tae pick a threid aff her jaiket.

She wasnae at the Castle. Nae matter how hard he looked, she wasnae there. He might hae gien up, but instead strode oot for Ethie Haven, against the flow: the banter o folk aff boats. When he got tae the harbour the men he'd walked wi hailed him. 'Sadies, look at thae beauties.'

'A fine supper, poached in vinegar water.'

They offered him a line, but he held up the flat o his hand.

'Ach man! Ye dinnae want tae be lanesome on the holiday.'

'Nae fear,' Wull said.

'Ah, ye're meetin somebody, sir?'

'Micht be that.'

'A lassie?' The three o them cheered and said he was a dark horse, he'd kept gey quiet about that.

The turn o the tide brocht a breeze and on the dunes Wull's feet sank and slipped and sea grass rasped at his ankles so he went whaur the tide had been and the sand was firm. A lang stretch, and his footprints faded ahent him. He rested for a while, watchin the boats till somebody cried 'Marion!' Jolted, he stretched his neck, but that Marion was a wee lass that had got her shoes weet. Whaur the Lunan Water slunk across the beach he rolled up his troosers.

'Better gaein roond by the road, man' somebody said.

He turned and squinted, for the sun was at its peak. 'Aye?' he said, took his boots

aff and hung them round his neck. 'Fairly that.' He scouted for a wey across. The current took the sand frae under his feet, carved a new, sharp bank, and he was in. Stanes on the riverbed. 'Jesus Christ Almichty!' Feet arched, he stumbled across and saw her back and hoped she wouldnae see him like that, trouser legs rolled up. But then she turned and the face was younger and there was nae fringe and it didnae matter wha saw him lookin like the eejit he was. He found a spot against the dunes and sat for a while and wondered what the Hell Cissy had made o him turnin up at her door, though she'd taen it in her stride and never asked the whys or wherefores.

A fag aye helped him think, but if he didnae mind whit he was daein he'd hae nane left tae offer. The smoke rattled round his lungs. He flicked his tongue. The rings hovered, faded. He wondered if she'd hae her cigarette holder, that had been his only taste o her, when the licht had filtered through the young leaves on the beech trees in Kelly Den and the burn had been swollen. He'd played the donkey and sucked at the stem and she'd laughed frae her belly and couldnae stop and he marvelled she had that in her, a wifie that had been the secretary o the Women's Guild, that read wee stories tae auld wifies that wasnae weel, that was makin a silk cushion for the kirk bazaar, and – he guessed – ate her denner frae china plates, and slept atween linen sheets.

She'd wiped her een wi her handkie and the laughs tailed awa but there was a douceness about her face, and she said, 'Wull Greig,' and he'd taen the cigarette holder frae his mooth and forgot tae breathe and would hae said somethin then but a look passed ahent her een – gone that quick he couldnae be sure – and he held his wheesht.

'You make me ... I havenae laughed so much for ages.'

He'd handed the cigarette holder back and pointed at the wee flower enamelled on the trumpet end. 'Forget-me-not?'

'Edelweiss,' she'd said.

Against the drag o the tide the waves swelled – a wee bit – wavered and sank. The

restless sea. Nae solid under yer feet: nae sure and steady like the land. Aye anither and anither and anither wave, comin or gaein, aye far ower much tae say for itsel. And the backwash, blood in yer ears: the same soond, that dulled yer wits if ye didnae tak tent.

The dunes petered oot and the rocks began, and fewer folk had bothered their backsides tae walk as far, and that was a relief. He micht hae kent that was whaur he'd find her. Fower women: twa men and he couldnae see her face, but it was her: the shoulders, the length o the back. The neck. Nae anither lass on the beach wi hair cropped as short. The white neck. Her hands on anither wifie's shoulders, their heids that close thegither... He wished it was him. But she was hardly scourin the beach for him, and it didnae look like there was much room on the rug. He half turned his back and watched the business o the schooner settin sail.

Ach, like enough her and her pal were whisperin secrets and whit else would posh lassies dae? Her and the pal drew apairt. That lauch o hers came straicht across the sand and the stufin went richt frae him.

Nuthin special, then, the wey she'd lauched for him.

She turned hersel roond and he micht hae waved, but ane o the men got tae his feet and a woman stood up and pinned a bonnet on her heid and he couldnae see Marion nae mair. Chit-chat and anither lassie up and the man made a show o brushin sand aff her shoulders, then took oot a pocket-watch.

Amongst a babble o voices: '...station.'

'God in heaven, I'm ower late.' Wull kicked at the sand.

The three o them on their feet linked airms: the man in the middle, struttin his luck. A chorus o 'cheeriebye', but it was just the three that left. Never gied Wull a second look as they passed and what else would he expect? The twa women had the look o her, though the younger had finer banes. Her sisters, that would be.

She was on her knees, clearin cups intae a hamper like there was nothin in the

world she wanted tae dae but that. Wull's shoulders went back. She'd as much as asked him. And if he'd picked her up wrang, well... Up on his feet afore he cheenged his mind. 'Miss Angus?' – that as he walked towards them.

'Wull!'

She'd half-expected him, he could see that. And she was happy. But the man was on his feet already and could hae squared up and that threw Wull for a meenit but he just held oot his hand and spoke the wey he'd speak tae any stranger. 'Good day, sir. William Greig,' and the baith o their hands was as firm as the ither.

'Robert Corstorphine.'

She stood up and rested her hand on the back o Wull's. He didnae ken whaur tae look. 'Fine day, Miss Angus.'

'Wull, please.' She lifted her hand and that was waur. 'My friends call me Marion.'

A friend ... he wouldnae want nae mair than that. Nae yet. He'd tak his time, she deserved that.

'I told you that already, Wull!'

A wey in, that was all he needed.

'Robert, this is the man ... the one who saved me when, you know, that day I got lost. On the hills.'

'Very pleased to meet you, Mr Greig.'

His face couthy enough. A gentleman, a real ane.

Marion took Wull's airm and turned tae her pal. 'Margaret ...'

The lassie was on her feet, a smile playin about her face.

'How d'you do, Wull Greig. I'm Margaret. Marion's friend.' She stood up.

'Marion's very best friend. Well, I think I am anyway, we've known each other for such a long time. Oh my God' – she put on an exasperated face – 'and don't the years just fly!'

A breith, at last, and she held oot her hand. ‘Delighted to meet you. We were all so, so glad you were there. Marion can be the most exasperating person in the world, but of course we wouldn’t like to lose her.’

Marion leaned forward, just enough that he noticed. ‘It’s lovely tae see you, Wull. I’m so glad you came.’

‘Well, my ... I didnae really expect tae be in Arbroath, but ...’

‘Cissy Greig’s brother, aren’t you?’ That Margaret fair liked the soond o her ain voice.

He nodded just enough tae be polite.

‘Is Cissy well?’

‘Aye.’

‘You’ve seen her then?’ Marion asked.

‘Aye.’

Margaret had heard Cissy was movin tae Dundee.

‘Speakin aboot it, richt enough.’

‘I do hope you’re going to join us, Mr Greig? Here, let’s sit here. I want to know all about you. Marion hardly told me anything.’

Robert picked up the rug, turned his back to the company tae shak the sand aff.

‘Margaret, you’re so impetuous. Mr Greig is probably at Lunan with his own friends.’

Maybe the man didnae want him here. ‘Well, I am, of course... aye, you’re right.’

Marion frowned.

‘What I mean is, I was wi them. Left them at Ethiehaven, though, tae mak their ain wey back. I tellt them ... told them I wanted tae walk the length o the beach first. I’ve never been at Lunan afore... can ye believe that? Nae afore the day.’

Marion gied Robert a wee touch on his arm and took the rug.

Wrapped roond her wee pinkie, Wull thocht.

The rug was laid on the sand, creases smoothed. Marion patted a spot aside her. 'Lunan is a bonnie, bonnie place to come, Wull. Why do you no sit down and enjoy it?'

'I'd a friend, once, a young lady, spoke very highly o Lunan Bay.' Eager as he was and nervous, he kicked sand on the rug.

'Such a shame you didn't get here earlier.' Margaret said. 'Marion's sister Ethel made ham and mustard sandwiches to impress her young man.'

A ghost o a scent, and he could hardly think, he hadnae been as close tae her since they were up on the hill. 'Aye?'

'You've just missed her. Amy too. Both her sisters. And Walter – Rev. Nicol, the new minister at the parish kirk – did you see them?'

'Well, I dinnae ken ... maybe... I was watchin the schooner.'

'We didn't finish our conversation,' Margaret said to Marion. 'I like Walter, you know. I do. But he is rather full of his own importance. You must agree, Marion?'

'Margaret! He may be my future brother-in-law.'

'And he thinks I'm a bad influence on you.'

'Please, Margaret!'

Margaret pretended tae be in a huff. 'It's true though. He does.'

Marion sighed and turned tae Wull. 'You're stayin at Cissy's?'

'I saw her yesterday.'

'She must have been pleased.'

'Well, you ken Cissy.'

The man – Robert – never let his face show much.

Margaret spoke to his back. 'I'm not a bad influence, am I Robert?'

Naebody spoke.

'You wouldn't think that, would you, Wull Greig?'

Wull wished she'd haud her wheest. Mair o a nuisance than the man, she'd turned oot.

'Margaret!' Marion raised her eyebrows at Wull. 'Don't be so obnoxious.'

Ach well, Wull thocht. The lassie was maybe gash-gabbit but ... there wasnae a soul on this earth was perfect or they wouldnae be here. He hoped Marion didnae think he was perfect. He wouldnae tell nae lies, but if she didnae ask, well... there was things she wouldnae like tae hear aboot, and lassies – but he'd been a young man then and that was whit young men did. He wasnae like that noo. But by God if she... if he ... if a man just got one chance, this was it.

Robert looked at Wull and shook his heid. A man o few words, Wull liked that.

Margaret niggled awa. 'And as for Amy – tagging along like a chaperone.'

The line o Wull's lips firm.

'I can't understand it, in this day and age, for Heaven's sake. She should be out with friends of her own.'

'You need a cigarette, Margaret,' Robert said, and held oot a wee tin: *Balkan Sobranie* in fancy letters. Metal on metal scraiked.

Wull gulped at his first draw, and there was companionship in the wey the smoke twisted up, but his voice wasnae lichtsome like he tried for. 'And which ane o you is the chaperone here?'

Margaret picked loose tobacco frae her tongue. 'We don't need chaperones, Mr Greig. We're old enough to make our own way in the world.'

Colour crept up Wull's neck.

'We've been friends for so long – the three of us – since we were in school really. Our families are friends ... our parents ... oh, they've all quite given up on us now I believe.'

Robert said he'd hae a walk by the cliffs.

Margaret scrambled tae her feet. 'Wait for me. I want to come.'

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Marion couldnae bear the thocht o the train back, when it had been sic a bonnie day, and for all the distance, and the breeze in her back and if she walked it'd clear her heid – no, nothing tae worry aboot, just the effect o the sun. If Robert and Margaret didn't mind? Wull would see her all richt. 'Won't you, Wull?'

Wull stuttered at the fear it might be a game but they all understood he meant 'Aye'.

Robert said nothin, just strapped up the hamper.

Marion's voice low when she spoke tae Wull. 'We'll walk tae the station with Robert and Margaret, shall we? You and Robert take the hamper?' She squeezed his arm. 'You'll like him. You'll hae a lot in common, you'll find.'

Wull took ae side, Robert the ither and the twa women walked ahead.

Robert waved a hand at a tract o purple bloom. 'Sea Lavender.'

'Aye?'

They shared a match. He liked the hills, Robert said.

'Aye.'

The women had found a short-cut, but it was a stuggle tae get the hamper past the broom.

Robert wondered how could it be that every time he walked the Tolmounth the colours, the light, the feel o the place was different?

'Aye, Wull said. 'Ye hae it there.'

The track steep for a bit, they fell quiet.

'Ye'll fish?' Oot o the blue.

The baith o them thocht the North Esk had the biggest trout.

‘Hoy!’ Margaret, waving, at the station already.

Robert said he’d traivelled a bit and that was whit he wanted, tae see the world.

Places ye could treck and never see another man – or woman – for weeks on end.

Countries in the far east: he liked it there, in the wilds.

‘Ye lose yersel,’ Wull said, ‘in the wilds.’

‘And find yourself.’

‘Aye, well, there’s that an aw.’

The train comin doon the line, but the baith o them kept their steady pace and there was time.

Marion waved like she was wipin dirt aff a windae until the train disappeared, and then that was it. They were on their ainsome. He had her. She linked in his airm and said she didnae want tae walk hame yet, could they nae gae back tae the beach? And though this was what she wanted – nae question but it was whit she wanted – he held back.

The tide weel oot, she showed him wave patterns on the sand. ‘And when the tide comes in again, they’ll disappear,’ she said, as if her hert would brak. They strolled on and she clung closer and he thocht that if somebody was tae see them, somebody up on the dunes there, her haudin in like that, they’d think... his thochts raivelled in his heid.

She showed him scattered heaps o pebbles, half buried: grey, pink, green. Tangled seaweed. Scraps o driftwood, fragments o fishing nets, wisps o rope, blunted seagull feathers. Her shape against the sky, bendin.

‘For you,’ she said, ‘Wull Greig.’

A shard o china, white and blue, smoothed by the sea: cool in his hand. He turned it ower and ower and ower again, didnae ken whit tae say.

In the gloamin the top layer o sand stirred, like the shimmer o a veil. Sea-grass dipped and swayed as if it was alive. ‘It’ll be dark afore we get back.’

She squeezed his arm. 'It's all right.'

'Robert's a fine man.'

'What Robert doesnae ken about plants isn't worth knowin.'

'Doesnae bum about it.'

'No.' She looked around. 'We could be the last folk on earth.'

'We could that.' That made him bolder. 'And what did ye tell yer pals, then?'

'You saved my life.'

She took his hand and turned it palm up and the shard o china still on his palm like he couldnae grasp it. She traced roond it wi the tip o her finger and took her hand awa.

He could still feel whaur she touched him.

'How far can you throw it?'

He slipped it intae his pocket and picked up a stane instead, threw wi all his might. It plopped into deep water.

'What else is there to tell?'

He threw anither stane.

'Wull ... thae times we met on Elliot Sands.' She studied the markings on a stane before she tossed it intae the sea. 'I cannae do it, nae like you.' Her heid doon, searchin for anither stane. 'And the last time, in Kelly Den?' She knelt in the sand and sifted it through her fingers. 'Did ye follow me there?'

Gulls were circlin in the bay. It should hae been easy – she was makin it easy – but still the words wouldnae come.

Sand frae her cupped palm oozed through her fingers. She brushed ae hand against the ither, but grains clung tae the creases. She traced a line tae her wrist. 'Nellie once tellt me I'd hae a long life,' she said. 'Contentment at the end.'

Sure o himsel there. 'If she tellt ye that, ye'd better believe it.' A flock o gulls in

the bay, divin for fish. ‘But is that all you’d wish for yersel? Contentment? Maybes ye could dae better than that?’

‘I’m too auld to wish anymore.’

‘Awa wi ye! Ye’re never ower auld.’

‘I wouldnae know what to wish for.’

‘Try.’

‘I wish....’ Her lashes dark against her cheeks. ‘I wish, I wish ... oh I dinnae ken, Wull. I wish I knew what to do wi my life. I wish folk would let me be. I wish I was useful. Look at Margaret. She’s in publishing. I could do somethin like that.’

‘Like what?’

They were turning inland, at the river bank.

‘I could... well, I suppose I could ...’ She turned her back. ‘Look what the sun’s done to the castle!’

The ruins deep red, but he was that close ahent her, his airm went across the front o her neck and the baith o her hands catched it and she held it close and didnae pull awa.

‘I could write. Maybe.’ She tilted her heid back against his shoulder, twisted roond tae see his face. ‘I could be a poet. I can write, you know.’

He couldnae see her face, just her lips parted and that was whit she did when she was thinkin.

‘Anyway, what would you wish for?’

‘I’d wish’ He pushed the fingers o his free hand through her hair and the glints in it and the smell o sun and sea and the scent was stronger here, close in ahent her ears, under her chin. He pressed against her and she didnae push awa and he thocht he couldnae wish for mair than this.

‘I’d a little brother once, she said. ‘I wish he hadn’t died.’

‘Some things ye cannae change.’

‘I wish I could sing, Wull.’

‘I could mak ye sing.’ He lifted his haund in shock at what he’d said. She caught it and gripped sae he felt the tips o her nails.

‘Don’t ever love me, Wull Greig.’

Chapter 3 – October, 1899

Black as the ace o spades oot there.

Wull rolled his sleeves above his elbows, picked his fiddle up and gied it a guid look. He thanked the Lord his pal Jock Gunn had turned oot tae be tone deif and Jock's fiddle had come his wey. He let his fingers slip up and doon its neck, stroked the curve o its belly wi a thumb, felt a scratch on the varnish wi his nail, scowled. He checked, it wasnae deep. The angle o the bridge – just grand. Ae, twa, three twiddles o the bow screw: aw it needed. He tuned up, played a chord. How that tone had mellowed ower the years.

Folk was still gaitherin, but for him the noise in the hall faded and there was just that chord. He let oot a sigh. He'd tak nothin for granted but there must be a chance. He'd will her tae come – the very same wey his mither had willed the fiddle for him. She would come, she would. She'd hear again his fiddle speak, see him mak folk dance tae his tune.

The door opened and ye could hear the wind rustle the beech tree. He looked across. Leaves – crisp and curled and the colour o her hair – flurried through the crack. A press o folk barged in, feet stampin, shawls happed against the grip o cauld. Cries o welcome and open airms and wee courtesies and the women got in huddles, as far frae the door as they could. Waves o goodwill.

Aleckie tested his new drumsticks. The dancers took notice: a hush.

'Richt, lads?' Wull said. 'Gay Gordons? The usual?'

They nodded.

'4/4.' A buzz then, as partner sought partner, took up positions. Wull's een dazzled by the gasolier, but there she was: eager, just the slightest wariness on the threshold as her een swept the company and sought him oot.

The fiddle under his chin, Wull played a G chord that reverberated richt through the hall. The very air above his heid vibrated. Aleckie battered at the chair seat. Wull's

heel tapped the flair and they were aff, richt intae 'The Star o Robbie Burns'. Wull's wrist went like buggery and the bow flew ower the strings and his fingers danced that quick his brain didnae even try tae keep up, though his lugs checked the resin was aye grippin.

Every note pure. Bert on the accordion, his heid aye doon, nae that sure yet, aye watchin his fingers on the buttons. The twang o the Jew's harp: just a young laddie, but by God he could play. Tune aifter tune: the dance-floor a swirl o purple and green and grey and blue – the dominie in his Cameron kilt and her in her broon frock wi a diamond pattern. But for now it was his job tae keep the band thegither and – eyebrows raised, a backward jerk o his heid – '“Cock o the North” comin up lads'. 6/8 – a change o tempo.

They kept the pressure up: reels, jigs, polkas. Some o the tunes took Wull back tae his years on the road: the moor o Rannoch, the great lonely peaks o the west, the Atlantic jaupin at the foot o cliffs. Some minded him o the pleasures he'd had wi his mither's folk: their sangs, tales o the wee folk and horses and dogs and trickery and done deals. The smell o woodsmoke, the wey Nellie would wave – 'Come in aboot the fire, laddie.' A waltz, and in the selection, they played 'The Northern Lights' – the first real tune he'd ever mastered. He watched her swirl roond the flair and minded how he'd played it for Miss Violet all thae years ago, against the noise o horses' hooves and the rattle o harness and she'd lifted her petticoats and twirled in the cobbled yaird, careless o the mud and the horse dung and the smell o the midden.

Marion was game tae, gie her that, and comely – and aye that gracious inclination o the heid. Nae lack o willin partners. He fancied she smiled when the new postmaster in Dinnet – as fat and wee a man as ye were ever likely tae see – tried tae birl her under his airm. Wull in a fever now, his collar damp, his oxters, the inside o his elbows, the palms o his hands, the cleft o his backside. And in atween the dances nae time but for a wipe o the brow, a sniff and a rub o stretched fingers on the side o his breeks. The folk were hungry for his music.

Suddenly, a smell o tea and at the end o the Lancers, the clatter o tea cups. The band looked tae Wull.

‘Twenty meenits, lads.’ He plucked the broken hairs aff his bow and cast them aside.

A crush at the tea urn till somebody sorted them in a queue: bairns clamoured for lemonade. The young ploughmen flooded oot the door, let the cauld rush in. Grumbles o discontent.

She was conversin wi the postmaster – him again. The twa o them took their cups tae the far side o the hall.

Somebody brocht Wull a cuppie. He mingled on the flair, nodded and smiled and spoke tae a wifie frae Aboyne, but his mind couldnae rest. He landed on the edge o a knot o folk, near enough he could hear Marion’s voice, and by God it fair sparkled against the postmaster’s drone. They drew ane anither aboot the poetry o Lord Byron, but she didnae agree wi him, that was somethin, and didnae bend tae his wey o thinkin. Nae chance, no.

Wull felt the wee cut on his chin, whaur he’d hacked it wi the razor, then checked the bittie paper in his breist pocket was still there. His blood still pumpin through his veins, he calmed doon enough tae drink his tea and drained the cup though he’d let it get cauld. Folk moved on and he was standin by himsel, an empty cup in his hand. Aabody in the hall watchin, and when did that ever bather him afore?

She was comin.

His heid raivelled again.

‘Wull Greig. How are you?’

‘Miss Marion!’ His face hardly kent how tae be. ‘How fine tae see ye.’

She fingered her green beads. A square neckline, edged wi tucks, roounded glass buttons doon her chest. ‘Wull Greig.’ She said it again, her hand on his airm, the pressure o her thumb, and the smile that started roond her een spread tae the corners o her mooth.

‘Congratulations to the band. An excellent dance.’

He looked for somewey tae put his cup. ‘Aye. And eh... you’ll hae been walkin on the hills the day, Miss Marion?’

‘I always love the Hill o Fare. But bitterly cauld up there today. I thought a dance would be just the thing.’

‘I noticed ye ... I see ye’ve met the new postmaster.’

‘Interesting man.’

Wull filled his lungs. ‘And eh, Miss Margaret?’

‘She didnae come, Wull. No this time.’

‘You’ll be stayin wi yer cousins in Aberdeen?’

‘Aye.’

‘But surely no catchin the late train back the nicht?’

‘I’m lodgin at the inn.’

*

A crack o licht under the door. One rap, and he turned the handle. The hinge creaked as he pulled the door ahent him. A sloped roof, a windae on the gable wall, a fire in the grate. Sheets turned back. Her nichtgoon, wi a ruff: her reflection in the lookin gless. She rubbed a hand up and doon her breist-bane.

‘Lock the door, Wull.’ He turned the key.

‘Hae ye somethin sair?’

‘Nothin tae see.’ She spoke tae him through the mirror.

The floorboards creaked under his tread. ‘Ye’re here, though.’

‘Aye.’

Her white neck.

‘I came tae see you. Again.’

‘Ye liked the dance?’

‘Aye.’ A half-smile in the mirror.

‘Ye must be tired. Ye was never aff yer feet.’

‘I wasn’t, was I?’ The wind rattled at the window. Ane o the candles near went oot in the draught.

‘I’ll sort that.’ Wull pulled the shutters to, dropped the hasp in place. The sound of the wind faded.

‘That’s much better. Did ye see the new moon, Wull?’

‘Aye.’

‘On its back?’

‘Aye.’

‘And the moon broch?’

‘Aye.’

‘Sign o a storm, they say.’

‘T’is that.’ Wull kissed the side o her neck and she shuffled up on the stool – their twa faces thegither now in front o them, the top buttons o his shirt open. She drew a line wi her finger whaur the mahogany o his neck met his white chest. His lips grazed hers.

A hesitation. She pulled back and rubbed at the corner o an ee.

‘Marion’ – he drew the name oot. ‘I mean, I can ... I’ll nae bide, if ye dinnae want.’

‘No, no, Wull.’ She caught his hand. ‘I want ye.’

‘Somethin wrang, though?’

‘No, no. I wanted to come.’

He squints. ‘Just ye seem ...’

‘I was just thinkin ... I dinnae think we can keep on like this.’

A smell o hay, a field o haystacks. Hardly mair than bairns, him and Miss Violet, lyin in the stubble, her heid restin on his airm, the pair o them that still they might be sleepin. She asks if he can see shapes in the clouds. She sees a butterfly and an eagle. He sees an arrow and an anvil and an axe.

'I love you, Wull Greig', she says.

He jumps like when his faither's belt catches him roond the back o the legs.

That's a road he cannae gae doon.

'Ye're richt, lass.'

'I dinnae like to tell lies...' The candles flickered their licht across her face.

'Ye're richt.' Wull's words flowed that quick he couldnae stop them. 'There's nae future in it, this wey. I want us tae hae a future. This isnae just a fling for me, ye ken' – turnin tae face her, grippin her by the shoulders, 'I'm smitten, Marion.'

'Oh, but Wull, it's no as simple as that.'

'What d'ye mean? How come?'

'Wull, we're no like that. The neither o us.'

'Like what?'

'You ken what I mean. Like other folk.'

His voice slow now, keepin it even, 'What d'ye mean?'

'We like our freedom. The baith o us.'

'But we could be free. That's what I'm tryin tae tell ye. We could get awa frae the lot o them. Thegither, you and me.'

'Do ye hae a cigarette, Wull?'

He lit twa, put ane atween her lips. 'And the neither o us is as young as we was.'

She stroked his hair back and kissed him on the forehead. He let her have a draw then took the fag back and stubbed it and led her to the bed. She climbed under the covers and pulled them up to her chin. Her head sunk in the feather pillow so it framed her face. Her fingers played with the top sheet where it was turned back on itself.

He stroked her hair back then turned and fumbled with his clothes.

'Put the candles out, Wull,' she said.

He held his hands in just the right place and a wee dog wiggled its ears on the wall before he blew the flame out. 'Dammit, I've sklyted wax on the mirror.' He groped his way to the bed before his eyes got used to the firelight.

The blankets were heavy and the springs of the bed creaked and the baith of them rolled into the middle and that made her laugh. He held her face in his hands and traced the shape of her chin and the line of her neck and his hands glanced her breasts.

She didn't stop him but was quiet until he rolled her on her side and stroked her back and then she said, in that voice he'd waited for, 'I like that.'

He moved closer and smoothed the flatness of her belly and caressed her bosom and followed the curves of her hips and her thighs and she was on her back again and his hands up her legs, and he said 'Marion!' though he didn't mean to, and moved on top then and the weight of him pressed her deep into the mattress and a noise like a cough as she buried her face in his chest and clung to the cheeks of his arse and let him thrust, and moved against him, but hardly made a sound.

They stirred with the noise of revellers thrown out by the landlord. She unravelled her legs. Her smell over him and under him and in him and on him.

'Ye all right lass?'

'Mm.'

'Ye was quiet.'

Her finger rested on his lips. 'We have to be quiet, Wull.'

He pushed her hand aside and turned his face awa. ‘Ach, but it’s me. I dinnae hae the words.’

‘I dinnae need yer words.’

‘Just sometimes though, I’d like tae say somethin ye’d tak heed o.’ He got up and groped for his shirt. ‘I want somethin better for ye, lass. Look at this.’ He rummaged for a wee bittie folded newspaper frae his shirt pocket. ‘Here. I wanted tae show ye this.’ She sat up as he relit the candles. ‘Frae last week’s Courier.’ The edges were stuck thegither wi sweat. She prised them apairt.

‘South African War. Volunteer Militia trains at Cupar,’ she read.

‘Nae that! Look, the middle column.’

‘What am I lookin for, Wull?’

‘There.’ He leaned ower and pointed tae an advertisement.

Canada

Allan Line Shipping Company

Cheap fares from Liverpool

Monthly sailings

‘What d’ye think?’

‘What aboot?’

‘I could start a new band. I could get a job. I could mak plenty money there.’

‘You want tae go tae Canada?’

‘I want us tae gae. I’ve made enquiries. I’ve enough – mair than enough – tae cover the fares. I’m nae skint, ye ken. I’ve interests, here and there. Ye wouldnae need a penny.’

‘Oh, Wull!’ She touched his face. ‘You’re guid for me, and to me. But I couldn’t.’

‘Everythin I hae, I’d gie ye.’

‘But I couldn’t go. No now. My mother ...’

‘Naebody in Canada would ken my mither was a Tinker.’

‘Wull, what are you sayin?’

‘I’m nae guid enough, am I?’

‘You ken fine it’s nae that.’

‘Ye think I couldnae keep ye?’

‘It’s nae that, Wull.’

‘What is it then?’

She folded up the cuttin. ‘You wouldnae understand.’

‘Try me, for Gawd’s sake, lassie.’

‘I cannae just walk away. Not like that. Mother’s no well. She worries.’

‘Ye’ve twa ither sisters.’

‘Aye, and that’s the problem.’

Wull took the paper back. ‘This micht be the only chance we ever get. If we dinnae tak it...’

‘I’d like tae get awa, Wull, of course I would. It’s what I aye hoped for.’

‘Come wi me, then.’

She reached for his hand. ‘I need time tae think.’

‘Ye think ower muckle. Gae wi whit yer hert says.’

‘I’m no sure I have a heart.’

‘Oh, lassie.’ Wull wrapped baith his airms roond her.

Ower his shoulder, she spoke. ‘I once wondered about goin tae Africa. Tae get away. Can you see me as a missionary?’

He pushed her awa. ‘A missionary? Africa?’

‘We’ve a link – our kirk – wi a mission in Natal.’

‘Holy Christ, Marion though, thae Zulus are fearsome.’ His fingers clicked.

‘Sorry. For the language, I mean.’

‘At least you mean what you say.’

‘You cannae gae tae Africa.’

‘Why no?’

‘Good God, Marion, the black men fecht ane anither, the white men fecht ane anither. They’ll all end up fechtin ane anither. Africa’s a hell o a place, I wouldnae gae there for nuthin in the world. I dinnae want ye tae gae there.’

‘And I didnae want you tae love me...’

Chapter 4 – February, 1900

If there had been the time, there was the twa he'd hae said cheerio tae. The wee kitchen maid at Dun, a guid hert she had, but ach, she was just a bairn, she'd find somebody mair her ain age. And the widow in Ballater. She'd happily mak her ham and eggs for someither lad, though she might sometimes wonder whaur he'd gone. And Betsy. He'd hae tellt her, if she hadnae heard already, but word had got roond and back: if he ever crossed her path again, he'd hae his guts for garters. Well, that was it, whit was bye was bye.

Wull tippy-taed ower the flair tae the table. He'd hardly ever gien his fiddle box a second glance ower the years, just as lang as it did the job. Now his een missed nothin. A wee crack here and there and the wood weathered and darkened. He lifted the lid. Ae pin o a hinge loose, but he could fix that. The padded silk linin his mither had made was faded and ripped, but still followed the fiddle's curves and kept it safe. He picked up his fiddle, set it under his chin and plucked at a string. The note true, and how would it nae be? Had he nae been constant tae it for twenty-five year? And that was what a fiddle needed. He plucked again, louder than he meant, damped it doon wi his hand quick. The fiddle under his chin, he just stood there. A B-flat chord in his heid and afore he kent it he was fingerin a 'Circassian Circle' and him and Marion lost in it, though the bow hand just kept time by his side.

Nae sound frae ben the hoose.

Christ, it was cauld. He'd better get his claes on: a wonder Cissy hadnae banked up the fire afore she went tae her bed. The envelope wi the papers in his box and he wouldnae hae peeked again if he hadnae thocht he'd better check the date.

He'd got it richt.

This was it, then. Signed and sealed, a new beginnin for the baith o them. Aye, his claes, that was the next thing, then the letter. If the worse came tae the worst, he'd need a letter.

He found paper and a pen o Cissy's ahent the china trinket on the mantelpiece. But his hand shook and his sighs were heavy as he tried oot 'my dearest' or 'my dear'. The first letter got crushed up and thrown in the bucket when it was nearly done because he wrote 'yours sincerely' and crossed that oot wi black lines then tried 'your affectionate' and that sounded richt but didnae look richt on the page so he wrote 'kindest regards' and then 'very truly yours' afore he made up his mind. He wrote the hale thing oot again and was half satisfied. Then he signed it – 'Wull' – but that Wull wasnae a man o the world, so he added 'Greig'.

Dear Marion,

I must tell you. There was a cancellation and we have two berths on the 'Castillion', a steamer of Allan Line, sailing from Liverpool. The date of the voyage is 23rd (this month).

It will snow soon so we must get a train to Glasgow in case it gets too bad. We have papers to pick up there. I know this is much earlier than we planned, but that is better. Just bring a few clothes. You can send for your books later. And don't worry, I'll buy what you need.

I am biding at Cissy's house (I had to tell her and she is not so pleased but it is not her business after all). I'll wait for you there. Come as soon as you can.

Yours aye,

Wull Greig.

He was vexed the lines sloped up at the ends, for he'd hae liked tae impress her... ach, but it was good enough. He read it ower again and wished he'd could hae said he loved her but couldnae see whaur it would fit. It sounded gey clippit, the wey the minister at Dun had spoke – him that had tae stand on a box tae see ower the pulpit. Miss Violet

and him, they'd laughed, when they were bairns, at the way the hem o his cassock stuck oot like a lassie's frock.

He took the travel papers oot o their envelope and wondered if he should put hers in wi the letter, but thocht the better o't. He wrote *Miss Marion Angus* on the envelope in his best writin, then sealed his letter in and touched it tae his lips, for there was naebody tae see.

The floorboards grumbled every step. The wag-at-the-wa chimed, tinny.

Cissy's man coughed and spluttered and Wull heard the springs creak and Cissy thump him on the back. Things hadnae turned oot the best for her, but it wasnae naebody's fault he could see, unless his faither's, leavin the land for a job in the mills. Ach, Cissy could bile her heid, thrawn besom she'd turned oot. But maybe if she could just get awa frae Arbroath and start again, he thocht. Maybe it'd be better for her in Dundee, if she ever got there. Somethin guid might come chappin at her door, that would turn her aroond. Aye, that's what he'd wish for her.

The papers loose noo, in his hand. Whit tae dae wi them? There was his fiddle box, but he wouldnae like Cissy nosin. He found the split in the linin and smoothed the papers and slipped them in there. His fiddle gaid back on tap and and he shut the box. It'd dae a few years yet.

Ootside, hardly a dawnin and not a sowel tae see. The smell o asphalt, and him mair used tae the sound o feet on the open road than the echo o empty streets. His feet took him tae the kirkyaird. The gate locked, he louped the wa. Clumps o early snowdrops poked through the grass.

Just their twa names on the stane, and their dates, and that wouldnae tell ye nuthin if ye hadnae kent them for yersel. Nothin tae say 'mither o' or 'faither o' – well, that was the way it was. If it'd been left tae him there likely wouldnae hae been nae stane, and how Cissy had scraped the siller thegither he didnae ken.

The taste o bile.

'Blood will out,' his faither said, a sneer on his face, and the twa o them glowered at ane anither. His mither riddled the fire wi the poker till she near put the damned thing oot then stood up and said 'Well then, laddie. Naethin that happens that isnae meant tae be. There's worse things a man can dae than tak tae the road.'

She sorted his collar and brushed stoor aff his jaike, and a pressure on his airms tae haud them doon and a wee shak o the heid, and she stood atween him and his faither.

'Just mind, laddie, haud yer heid up and keep yer ee on the road aheid. And never wish ill on any man, or it'll come back tae haunt ye.' She gied him his penny. *'Keep this and ye'll never want,' she said, and pushed him oot the door.*

He pulled his bonnet ower his ears and strode awa and that'd be the last time he ever left the pair o them. But his penny would likely work as weel in Canada as it had here.

The grip o winter ticht. Clouds that could hardly pull themsels along. The abbey ruins staggered under their wecht. The High Street empty, shops shut. Even the smell o the Brothock Burn – like a shit bucket – frozen. That was the thing about Canada – cauld enough in winter. And there was mountain peaks ye couldnae climb, forests ye couldnae walk through, rivers ye could hardly see across, lakes like seas. And great empty spaces o virgin soil for a man ready and willin tae throw roots doon.

Wull's tackety boots clipped a rhythm. He whistled like a blackbird.

Dun Kirk. The melody sung by the precentor – doh te doh soh fah ray me soh – like music sung in heaven. Miss Violet peerin at him frae under her bonnet.

The bells o the Fisherman's Chapel dirled oot. He stopped deid at the crossroads wi Commercial Street, looked this wey and that. The smell o the sea drew him. Grey, the colour o his mither's pewter teapot, it worried at fingers o rocks that stretched frae the land. The ruins o that damned hoose, like a warnin, at Danger Point. Waves threw themsels at the harbour wall. Decks were cleared on the boats: fish boxes lashed or braced, hatches battened doon, cables and lines secure. Hardly a soul on the road.

But he'd surely catch her gaein tae the kirk and he'd raise his cap and she'd stop and speak, her voice would be steady and proper and polite – a marvel tae him how she could dae that and naebody ken whit was under the surface. He was gruff but he could be polite and her sisters wouldnae ken he was weak at the knees. They'd walk on likely, oot o politeness, and he'd tell her himsel then that it was done and that was the wey he'd like it tae happen, so he'd see her face – the hope and the joy. But if the twa sisters didnae walk on he'd pass her the note but whether he'd say 'I hae a note for you, Miss Angus' or 'I've written a note for you, Miss Angus,' and hand it ower bold as brass, or whether he'd slip it intae her hand when naebody was lookin he couldnae mak up his mind.

He recognised her faither stridin oot, a fine figure, ye could see his breedin in the straicht back and the easy flow o his stride, his character in the set o his face, aye even in the wey he'd twisted his mutton chops.

Wull lifted his cap and said 'Good morning, sir' and the man hailed him, squintin like he couldnae mind wha Wull was, but was curious and would hae stopped for a blether if he hadnae been hurryin for the early mornin service. Interested in folk.

Wull should hae gone man tae man, stood up for himsel. Maybe her mither wouldnae hae been happy, but yon was a reasonable man. He was vexed he hadnae, but it wasnae for lack o backbone, it wasnae whit she wanted and he'd hae tae live wi that noo.

A brattle o thunder. The clouds piled up, layer upon layer, ower the sea, pushed ane anither aside like currents o a river. Flakes o snaw the size o feathers started tae fall

and swirl like they never wanted tae settle. Snaw and snaw and mair snaw. Wull couldnae see twa inches in front o his nose and when he turned, couldnae see whaur he'd been.

Her bedroom at the back o the hoose, her bureau at the windae and it wasnae the first time he'd stood under the big beech and waited. A patch o ground still clear o snaw on the lea side, the trunk wide enough for his back and skeleton branches low enough he didnae stick oot like a sair thumb. He heard the back door open, couldnae see it for the wall. It wouldnae be her, she never came that wey. A bit o business wi a shovel. The door banged shut, but that cheered him, somebody was in.

A brow hoose. Nae like Dun, but fine just the same. He'd get her ane like that some day, she'd want tae settle some day. That was what a woman wanted.

The steeple clock chimed the quarter past the hour – muffled in the snaw – and then the half past. There was nae wey he'd missed them. He'd hae heard the front door and their voices and even seen them at the end o the road if they'd gone. They werenae gaein tae the service, nae the day. He checked the windae. Nae wave, nae swish o a curtain. He stamped his feet and thumped his airms. The snaw twa inches deep already and that must be why the nane o them were oot. He wondered what hairm there'd be in knockin at the door – there must be a chance she'd open it.

A bang frae the front o the hoose and that must be them. He was on the road afore the sound died. He'd meet them at the corner.

It was her sister. And nae jaiKet, nae shawl, just a wee bolero and she was shiftin, shoulders jerkin like somebody was on her back, hardly lookin at him though he stopped richt in front o her.

'Excuse me, Miss.'

A muscle on her cheek twitched. She looked like she'd been greetin.

'Are you...' His smile ower quick and bein false didnae suit him and put her on edge, the last thing he wanted. 'Miss Angus?' Her heid twisted tae the side like she

wanted tae run but she kept her een on him, half shut lids, sizin him up. Her questions fired quick.

‘Why do you want to know?’

‘It’s just. Eh...’

‘Where did you come from?’

‘I was just comin tae your house.’

‘Who are you?’

‘Wull Greig, Miss. Pleased tae meet you.’ He touched his cap.

‘What do you want?’

He patted his pocket. ‘I’ve a letter.’

‘A letter! Why didn’t you say so? Give it to me!’ Her hand thrust at him.

Wull took the envelope oot but held it back. ‘I was wonderin if ...’

‘Give me the letter, Mr Greig.’

‘Sorry miss, I didn’t mean it was...’ He backed awa. ‘It’s nae for you. It’s for your sister.’

‘My sister!’ Wull’s airm went oot tae steady her. ‘Miss, I think I’ll better tak ye hame. Ye’ve just yer baffies on.’

She let him steer her along the path, but came back tae her senses at the door. ‘I’m all right. You can go now. I’ve just had a shock, that was all. Give me the letter. I’ll see Amy gets it.’

‘Oh, sorry miss, it’s nae for Miss Amy.’ He showed her the name. ‘It’s for Miss Marion Angus.’

‘Marion! Dear God in Heaven I thought you meant Amy.’

‘Is Miss Marion in?’

‘Of course she’s in. Where else would she be on a day like this? Here, give it to me.’

He stood like a gowk. ‘Could you maybe get her tae ... ?’

She pulled at her bottom lip. ‘Look, my sister’s indisposed. Do you want me to give her the letter or not?’

He held the envelope in twa hands. ‘Ye’ll nae leave it lyin? Ye’ll see she gets it?’

She snatched it. ‘What do you take me for?’

*

Though he wore a groove in the flair atween the fireside and the windae, there was nothin but white oot there. He took the shovel frae the side o the fire and cleared the doorstep. The debris in the street, bits o tarpaulin happed ower roofs, heaps o coal and dust, years o heavy toil and sweat frae Robbie Dean’s coal yaird – all smothered in a bonnie white goon. Even the cairt wi the broken axle looked the better for a coverin, and nae sailors brawlin at the White Ship Inn.

Back tae the fire and he shifted the claes horse and set the front legs o his stool hard against the fender. Him and Marion, now... his fingers tapped on his thigh, but he couldnae think o the tune, just a ta, tatty, ta tatty ta tatty ta. Ower and ower, till Cissy said ‘For the love o God, Wull.’

He stood up and his een caught the wee china trinket on the mantelpiece, the ane his faither had found in twa bits in the midden o the big house at Dun. Ye could hardly see the wee crack atween the shepherdess and the minstrel, whaur his faither had mended it wi white lead. His mither had said, ‘That’s you Wull, you and yer lass.’ He’d blushed and looked awa, feared for whit his mither kent. His finger traced the lassie’s face, tilted up at the minstrel like her hert would burst.

Cissy got up tae trim the Tilly lamp. A hiss, a circle o licht on the table, a smell o paraffin.

He went tae the windae. Snaw was piled half-wey up the pane. ‘I’ll shut the curtain, will I?’ He’d gae up the road the morn, try again ... he’d catch her, he would. No, he’d said he wait. Christ, the lassie would hae gien her the note, surely? Even if there was somethin on her mind, onie fool could see that. The air still thick wi snaw and if it didnae stop in the nicht? How had he nae thocht o that? He’d hae tae help her. Tyach, he should hae thocht o that. Christ, if he was ...and what if ... his mind wouldnae settle. She needed a hand. She’d leave afore he got tae her hoose. He’d miss her if she went roond by Margaret’s... she’d hae tellt Margaret, sure as hell, would she nae? He went tae poke the fire but Cissy stirred in her seat and he stopped himsel in time and just felt the wecht o the poker in his hand. ‘Ye want some coal on the fire, lass?’

‘We’ll mak that puckle dae a whilie.’

He rested an elbow on his knee: his chin in his hand.

‘Ye were that sure she’d come.’

He folded his airms and leaned back. His foot tapped the seconds on the flair.

‘It’s a big thing ye’re askin.’

‘Christ-sake, Cissy, she’ll come.’ Stool legs scrapin on the flair. He went back tae the windae and lifted the curtain: the black mongrel bitch frae next door in the road. The glass runnin weat. ‘She has a mind o her ain.’

‘Dinnae you worry yersel, I ken that.’ Cissy’s face torn as the sheet she was mendin. ‘That’s nine o’clock though.’

‘The last train awa.’

‘Oh aye. Expert on the timetable, are ye?’ He unlaced his boots. Nothin else tae be done the nicht. He should hae kent she’d need time. He hadnae... he shouldnae ... the neither o them had thocht it’d be that quick. But twa days in hand, he tellt himself. There wasnae much o it, but there was time.

A bang at the door. Cissy gied him a look and picked up her things. Wull pushed his hand through his hair. ‘I never meant her tae bide the nicht, Cissy.’

‘Stir things up, ye never ken whit’ll happen.’ Cissy went ben the hoose and slammed the door.

Well, needs must, and thank the Lord. She’d come. He’d think o somethin, he would, think o somethin. Just – it was a guid thing Cissy’s man wasnae hame yet. The door opened in the wey, drapped sna at his feet. The bitch had shat on the doorstep and it was Rev. Angus stepped across it and passed him by wi nae mair than a nod o the heid and shook the sna aff his coat and his boots. Just ae set o footprints tae the door and not anither soul in the street, and whit could Wull dae but follae him in?

He was sayin he wouldnae sit, thank you very much and he hoped Wull’s sister was well for she’d let her membership lapse, and that was a great pity, for the kirk aye welcomed sinners back intae the fold. Now. He’d come straicht frae the evenin service. There was business tae be dealt wi and he hoped this wasnae a bad time? Wull braced himself against the mantelpiece but the man’s voice was douce enough and he didnae look in a state. Maybe it’d be for the best if they kent.

‘I might as well be blunt. There’s no easy way.’ the voice still measured. ‘Mr Greig, you’ll be a reasonable man. And a man of the world. I can talk straight. My daughter was most distressed.’

‘Whit?’

‘Very distressed.’

‘Distressed?’ Aye, she had been, but whit was that tae dae wi him? He’d just asked her tae gie ower a letter.

‘Aye.’

‘She’s gone away.’

The man was makin nae sense. ‘I dinnae ken whit ye’re speakin about.’

‘She doesn’t want you to know where she’s gone, doesn’t want to ever see you again, doesn’t want any contact, of any kind, with you.’

‘Marion?’ Everythin jumped intae focus. ‘She’s awa?’

‘No prospect of ... unless – until...’ The maist o the words went ower his heid, just every time the man said ‘Marion’ it put a catch in his chest, and at ‘far away’ he saw her, caught in no-man’s land, spears flyin through the air above her heid, sodgers advancin frae the other side, firearms at the ready.

‘Whatever impression you had of Marion, Mr Greig, her allowance is small. Perhaps you thought otherwise?’

Was he meant tae speak?

The man got tired o waitin. ‘Yet, she’s been accustomed to a good life – travel, the theatre, music. Well, that’ll have to change.’

Not a flame left on the fire, just a chill creepin up frae his feet. But a smoulder in his belly and ae hand in a fist. He covered it wi the ither. Would the man never shut up? Would he never just gae and let Wull think. And Cissy ben the hoose, her lug tae the door. She’d warned him it was nae use mixin wi toffs.

‘Perhaps you mistook gratitude ...’

The smile squint, and fingers twiddlin a ring on his pinkie.

‘Shall we agree, then, Mr Greig, a misunderstanding? I’m sure you’re a reasonable man.’

His tongue loosened. ‘I’d hae liked tae see her.’

‘She didn’t want to see you.’

‘I’d believe it if I’d heard her.’

The man drew himself up, hands thegither, like he was in the pulpit, just the points o his fingers touchin. ‘Mr Greig, I didn’t want to have to do this, but she’s sent you

a message.’ He took Wull’s envelope frae his pocket and turned it upside doon. His letter, torn tae shreds, scattered ontae the hearth. A glow, and gone.

The minister was still speakin. ‘and if we agree that’s an end to it, I’ll take no further action – make no complaint against you.’

The set o Wull’s face changed. He reached for Cissy’s fags on the mantelpiece.

‘I’ll ask God’s forgiveness for you both. The bringing of this into the light of God’s truth is the first step towards redemption – for you and Marion.’

That catch again, in Wull’s chest. He let oot a cry.

The minister’s fingers moved apart, thegither. ‘Sin is most to be dreaded when it’s hidden, buried away out of sight in the recesses of a man’s heart.’

It gied Wull some comfort tae look by the man, at his shadae on the wa, that was stretched and ugly, but there was nae wey for his anger tae gae but intae his fists. His hands shook. He tapped the matches on the packet o fags and put them doon again, near choked on his ain words. ‘I didnae think it was a sin tae love.’

‘Ah, but the right kind of love?’

‘Whit’s richt for you micht nae be richt for her.’

‘Mr Greig, love is not just a question of what you feel. Duty, and responsibility is the greater love. You may not know, Marion’s mother is in delicate health. And – in the very near future – we expect Ethel to get engaged to a minister of the church.’

Christ, it wasnae her he wanted.

‘Marion wouldn’t wish any scandal that’d shame her family – or jeopardise her sister’s happiness.’

‘And her happiness?’

‘I think she’s demonstrated, by her actions, where she sees her happiness lies. Mr Greig, perhaps you’re not aware. This is not the first time Marion has... let’s say, been injudicious’

‘What ye tellin me that for?’ Wull shook his heid. ‘Dae ye think that bothers me?’

‘I’m here with her welfare in mind.’

The tilly lamp spat, near empty.

‘If you care for her in the slightest ... I’m quite prepared to – let’s say – compensate you. Perhaps, in the circumstances...’

The licht sputtered oot. Shadows leached intae ane anither – the reek o paraffin. His mither’s wee ornament, that was in Wull’s hand ae second, shattered against the far wall the next.

Outside, snaw covered every track.

Chapter 5 – March, 1900

‘Marion?’ Amy hovers beside me, playing with a button on her blouse. ‘Missed you.’

I pinch the top of my nose. ‘I’ve only been away a few weeks.’

‘And Aunt Tweedie?’ Hair pulled back, framing her face. Curls resting on her shoulders, not one out of place... a slight frown, her mouth held in a pout. ‘How is she?’

I glance at this week’s contribution to the *Guide* and check the clock: almost lunchtime – mustn’t miss my last deadline. My elbow slides forward on the desk, chin resting on my hand. Some slight regret, maybe, that I’m giving up my ‘career’, but it won’t take long to get a foothold in Canada, and fewer distractions there. I’ll take it more seriously.

Amy’s still restless: there’s something she wants to say. I lay the pen along the spine of my notebook.

‘Nothing much wrong with her, actually, when I got there, after me rushing to the rescue. Don’t know why papa made such a hue and cry. But as it happens, I enjoyed seeing her. And you never know, after all, with someone her age...’

An expression behind Amy’s eyes.

‘For Heaven’s sake, you look as if you’re about to burst, Amy. What is it?’

‘Nothing!’ She stops fiddling with the buttons on her cuff and pushes at the cuticle of a nail. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Oh no-o! How did that happen?’ Ethel’s inspecting her embroidery through a magnifying glass.

She reminds me of a picture in one of my very first annuals. ‘Be good, my maid, and let who will be clever’, the caption.

‘I can’t believe this! Has somebody been interfering with my embroidery?’ She glares across the room.

It’s the first time she’s spoken to me since I came back. I shrug.

Amy throws up her hands. 'Not guilty!'

I'm very particular about how I arrange my papers, where I slot my books on the shelf.

'You're always so busy, Marion, these days.' Amy's voice drops to almost a whisper. 'Actually, I did want to ask you something.'

'Yes? About?'

'I know you think I'm rather foolish.'

Feigning amazement – 'I'd no idea you'd such insight!'

'See? I knew it.'

'Just teasing.'

'You always make fun of me.'

I give a down-at-the-corners smile.

'I'm not sure you've realised. Well, why would you, you're hardly ever here. I'm quite mature now.'

I retrieve my packet of cigarettes.

'Mama doesn't like you smoking.'

I hold out the packet. 'You want one?'

'Of course I don't. You think I want stained fingers? You're a disgrace, Marion, encouraging me.'

'Is that what you wanted to tell me?'

Ethel's voice: 'Heaven's sake, you two. Stop your whispering and bickering and let me concentrate. I'm having to take out every stitch I've done this morning.'

'Ethel, if you need a magnifying glass to see the mistake, no-one else is going to notice.'

'How dare you! As if I'd take advice from you. You don't know how to take pride in anything. Miss Marion Slapdash-get-it-done-as-quickly-as-I-can.'

I protest, but not too much. 'What about the cushion I made for the church bazaar?'

'Mama finished it. Don't pretend you're in the least bit interested.' Her face pinched. "'Who cares if I wear an old tweed jacket and if the hem of my skirt's been torn for months and I haven't bothered to sew it up? Who cares what company I keep? Who cares if father has a position to maintain? I'll get out on the hills in the wind and rain and do what I want. Devil take the ...'" She has a talent for mimicry, but her movements are awkward and she knocks over a cup, splashing tea on her embroidery. 'Now see what you've made me do!'

'Rather out of humour today, aren't you?'

'No thought for anyone but yourself.' She bundles up her tablecloth and thrusts the stain in my face as she leaves the room. 'You know very well this is for my bottom drawer.'

'Soak it in a solution of preservene soap.' I think I'm being helpful.

'Don't you ever – ever – not you, of all people – try to tell me what to do!'

In the quiet she leaves behind, Amy and I look at one another. We hear the tap in the kitchen sputter.

'It sounds as if it's choking, or Ethel is.'

'The water supply's been very low. Something to do with the pipes freezing, they said. You were lucky not to be here when the snow was so bad.'

'What's wrong with her anyway? What did I say?'

'It's because William hasn't proposed yet. She expected him to, on her birthday.'

'He's bound to, eventually, isn't he?'

'I suppose so.'

She re-arranges some daffodils in the vase. 'But don't you think, Marion, she might put a man off, always making plans and talking about the children she's going to have...' A long silence, hands clasped behind her back.

Against the light I can't see her face.

'Marion... why didn't you marry Robert?'

I study papa's back-to-front writing on the blotter, 'eideewT raeD'. His signature even more of a scribble than usual.

'When you had the chance? He's so... such a gentleman. And from a good family. I'd have liked him for a brother-in-law.'

The end of my cigarette taps *gentleman* on the blotter. The very same rhythm as *Tinker man*.

'You could've done well out of it. You could've had a nice house' – she moves to stand right beside me – 'and – probably – well, at least two children by now.'

'How d'you know about that?'

She lowers her gaze. 'Just some talk in town.'

'What kind of talk?' I'm calm, as if I'm only mildly curious.

'You don't know?'

'You haven't told me anything yet.'

'And they haven't – Robert and Margaret?'

'Amy, I don't know what you're talking about.'

'They're getting engaged.'

'Robert and Margaret?'

'That's what the news is. Not official though, not yet, so you can't say anything.'

I laugh.

'You don't mind?'

'Of course I don't.'

‘I thought you might be upset.’

‘Margaret’s been playing her cards close to her chest. Well, so would I. But she’d have told me if I’d been here.’

‘Don’t you mind even a little bit?’

‘I’m pleased.’

‘But...’

‘It was long time ago, Amy. And none of your business. We’re just good friends.’

‘But you were in love?’

Maybe it’s being the youngest gives her confidence to speak her mind. A final draw on my cigarette. The ashtray’s full from my morning’s work.

‘You were in love, Marion, weren’t you? That’s what they say. Then suddenly it was all over.’

My words more pronounced. ‘Ah, so that’s it. More to the point – are you in love?’

She’s the first to look away. ‘Well, actually, I ... I think I may be.’

‘You’d know.’

‘So you have been?’ She narrows her eyes. ‘I knew it...’

‘Amy, tell me. Who is it? Come on, tell me!’

She turns away. ‘I’m being serious. Please don’t treat me like a child.’

‘Then don’t behave like one. Who is it?’

‘Well, I can’t say yet... that’s the problem. I’m not even sure. He may not be the right one.’

I want to know what Nellie sees in my hand. She pours the tea. ‘Here, get that doon ye first, and I’ll tell ye a story,’ she says.

‘Three lads want tae mairry this ae lassie. She says she’ll tak the ane that brings her the finest present. The first brings gowd, the second the carcass o a deer. The third says he doesnae hae nae present but he’ll tak her tae see a bonnie wee flower high up in the hills.’

Nellie stands up, pushes her hands intae the small o her back.

‘So...’ I ask, ‘which ane did she marry?’

‘Whit ane wuid you hae?’

‘You’ve a choice, Amy?’

‘Well, yes, of course.’ Amy preens herself. ‘But the one I’m thinking of... It certainly isn’t what you think, Marion, he doesn’t have a great deal of money. I suppose that’s maybe a worry, as far as Mama’s concerned. He isn’t even the most handsome – but he’s ambitious and single-minded and there’s something about him I do like. I really do.’

‘Has he said anything?’

She clears her throat. ‘Not actually said. But I think – you know, from little things, that he likes me.’

I prod a tight muscle in my shoulder.

‘You spend far too much time at that desk. Have you nothing better to do?’

‘No.’

‘Here, let me.’ She rubs.

‘That’s sore.’

Her hand kneads up my neck.

‘What can I do, Marion? I can’t be sure yet what he thinks. I need to make sure he notices me, you know, that special way. Maybe he thinks I’m too young.’

I allow myself to feel flattered, and lay my hand over her hand, lace my fingers through her fingers. 'Here's an idea.' My voice bright: 'Remember that old gypsy woman? The one that used to come to Arbroath?'

'Hair all over the place? You took me to her camp once when I was little. I was terrified of her.'

'She was harmless. Nellie, her name was. Anyway, she once told me a man falls in love with a woman's smell, not the way she looks. So all you've to do is tuck your hand in your armpit before you shake hands with him, and he'll never get you out of his mind.'

She pulls her hand away. 'That's disgusting, Marion.'

I have an idea. I know how to finish my column. 'I have to work now Amy.' It's easier to turn my back on Amy than it was to extract myself from Aunt Tweedie's. I take up the pen and write. That'll do. That's it. Perfect.

Yawning and stretching, I meander over to the window. I'm hoping Wull might come today, but there's no sign yet. I guess he'll be waiting under the tree when I open my bedroom curtains in the morning.

'Ethel's right. The company you keep!'

'It was the only advice I could think of.'

'Fine help you are.'

'What does she mean, anyway, the company I keep?'

'No much wonder you're still on your own. Your hair stinks of cigarette smoke.'

Chapter 6 – April, 1900

That's two months now since I saw Wull, and an extra day, it being a leap year. It's been a long time. I tip-toe to the window. No. Not yet. Right, then, time enough, though. My eye flicks over the room. Everything normal, on the surface. I open the wardrobe door. Clothes I'm leaving are pushed forward to hide the gap behind, the ones I'm taking are in the hold-all under the bed. Notebooks are packed in the hatbox: the silhouette of a fox on its side.

He warned me it'd 'tak a wee whilie.' The sound of him so strong he might be at the foot o my bed. What wi the weather and this second cousin o his mother's he'd to see, that looked after his horses, and some man that 'kent folk' in Canada. 'Bugger me, lass, I'll need tae find him first. This time o year he'll be holed up in the west.' And 'ends tae tidy up wi the band', you could understand that, and some folk he'd have tae see, though he'd tell naebody whit we were about. Arrangements to make. 'The April sailin', he said. 'we'll mak that.'

'But are you sure, Wull?' I asked.

'Fine that. The crossin willnae be sae fierce.'

'I mean about us, about what we're daein. You hardly ken me, really.'

'Lassie,' he struggles to find words, that's what makes them precious. 'I want tae be wi you. There's nothin I wouldnae gie up tae be wi you. And though I'm nae... I cannae say it guid, but I swear tae ye lass... by my deed, I swear it, that ae day – if it's the day ye dee – if it's wi yer last breith, ye'll ken whit ye meant tae me.'

The sound of the front door and that must be Rev. Nicol leaving. From the length of time he's been shuttered in the study with papa I think he's asked for Ethel's hand at last. The back door opens. Papa strides down the garden path and back, down and back, like that lemur the harbour-master's wife keeps in a cage. They've been talking business, not romance.

Poor Ethel. I stand stock-still, and as he makes for the back door again he glances up. I don't have time to move away, so wave, perhaps more cheerfully than I intend. I think he sees me but he pays no heed – his face strained. Something more than just Sunday's sermon bothering him.

Nothing to what will come. 'Dear God,' I clasp my hands together under my chin, 'Help papa understand.' A knot forms in my gut. I tell myself things will be easier in the house after I've gone: my failures are a constant thorn in mama's flesh.

You've made your bed, now lie in it.

Papa will concoct some story acceptable to the elders of the kirk. He's good at that.

'Just you get yersel ready, lass. Tak what ye need, nae mair,' Wull said. 'And ye'll ken, when ye see me, that's it.'

We could meet in Glasgow, I suggested, I could get myself there.

'Thegither,' he said. 'We'll gae thegither. Every step o the wey.'

A few days notice, though. Just time to get to Liverpool, go through the formalities – not long enough to be discovered. It won't take long to find our feet once we get to Canada. We'll start in the east – lots of Scots folk there and the fiddle will open doors. I'll teach. Reading, writing – French, there might be a call for that. Always a need for teachers. And I might get work on a newspaper now I've experience. That's bound to count, even for a woman.

Papa's gone back in. My stomach-ache has eased. I spread my hands flat on the glass. The pane is so cold my hands almost stick to it. I peer to the right. No sign. Well, if not today, tomorrow. So much the better. I'll see Margaret and Robert. I must see them.

A blackbird on the top branch of the crab apple looks as if he's lost something. I'd like – I think it's time – to clear things up with Cissy. Maybe I should visit her this very day, talk things through. She might know when Wull's expected. I stare beyond the blackbird, beyond the tree, into the distance, can't get her out of my mind.

Practical things, I need to concentrate on practical things. I smooth the bedspread over the pillows and tuck it in the way mama likes. With my foot I ease the hold-all a little further under the bed. My shawl's in the hat-box when I check. My hands rest on the bed-end as I look around. The good and bad tangle up in my head.

Cissy. I'll go to see Cissy.

*

The water in the harbour's been flattened by freezing fog, just a swell visible under the surface. The tide eases itself over boulders embedded in sand - a sound like the flap of stretched linen on bleaching poles. My last chance to breathe in the reek of the smoke barrels, the mixture of tar and brine that is the the harbour. Fishing boats and square rigged brigs. On the quayside, a fishwife loads her basket. Stevedores heave rolls of sailcloth. East Grimsby's a jumble of coal merchants, chandleries and taverns. I turn at the boat builder's yard and walk along by the kirk.

My chance to say the things I've long wanted to say.

I know all the smells of the High Street: fish, bread, hot mutton pies, spices, cheese, tea, coffee, bacon, tobacco, vinegar. The whiff of paraffin from Archie Stewart's close. Towards the Abbey somebody's making marmalade. The warm stench from the stables: stale beer when someone opens the door of the public house on the corner of James Street, where Cissy lives.

Slates are missing from her roof. Rough jute hangs across the lower part of the window. The door's splintered where someone's kicked it open. I take my glove off for a sharper knock.

'Wha is it?'

I'm about to cry 'It's me, Cissy,' like I used to, when the door opens.

She's wipin her hands on a peenie. Grey hairs already; her face still bonnie, but there's a gap where her front teeth should be. The eyes still pierce me.

I can't think what to say.

She leans against the doorframe. 'Christ, you've a brass neck. What the hell dae you want?'

I want to ask if she minds sharin a pennyworth o toffee and a bottle o ginger beer frae Stumpy Bowman's? My feet gettin tangled in the skippin rope? Hide and seek in the kirkyaird, followin the burn in Tarry Den, scrunchin our taes in the sand under the auld wreck on Elliot beach? Does she no mind climbin on the wooden dolphin by the harbour? Pickin buckies on the rock flair at Carlinhaugh?

My hand falls back by my side. 'Cissy,' I say, 'I think Wull micht hae spoken tae ye?'

'And whit if he has?'

'I wanted tae talk tae you afore... you ken whit I mean?'

'Say whit ye bloody well like. Ye never was backward at comin forward. But I'm nae sayin I'll pey nae heed.'

'I'm sorry, Cissy, about...about what happened. Between us.'

'Atween us?' She shrugs.

'Cissy, I didnae mean ... I ken whit you think.'

'Mair than I dae, you bletherin shite, standin at my door when I've work tae dae.'

'I wish we hadnae... lost touch.'

‘Not a whit o difference it made tae me.’

‘It isnae just because o Wull I’m sayin that. You were my best friend.’

She shakes her head.

‘No, really. Even after George died.’

Her arms fold across her chest.

‘That didnae mak any difference.’

‘And how the bloody hell should it?’

‘Well, you know, what mama ...’

‘Jesus Christ, spare me the sermon!’

‘And I dinnae ken why ... wi what we had? Ower Robert?’

‘Never gien him anither thocht either.’

‘He didnae ever mean tae mak ye think... gie ye the impression ...’

‘Aye, you’d ken all about that. Just wanted his cock up my drawers, did he?’

I fall back as if she’d slapped me. ‘You’ll hae heard...’ I manage to say at last.

She presses her fingers intae the hollow o her neck.

‘Aboot him and Margaret? Gettin engaged?’

‘That the latest tittle-tattle? At the *Soirées*? The toffs’ll be richt plaised.’ She turns back into the house. ‘And you thocht I’d be interested?’

‘No!’

She shakes my hand off.

‘Cissy, please! Amy just told me, that’s why... No, it was just, when I met Wull, it was like, fate. I thought maybe it was all meant. You know, the way Nellie used to talk?’

‘Christ Almighty, dinnae bring Nellie intae it. Awa ye go, back whaurever it was ye’ve cam frae. Ye didnae bide awa near lang enough. I tellt Wull ye were a hertless bitch.’

‘Ye’ve seen him?’

Her look says more than words could.

‘All I wanted was tae shake hands wi ye Cissy. For auld times sake. And for Wull.’

She folds her arms. ‘That’ll be it, then?’

‘Hae ye heard from Wull though?’

‘Wull?’ Her face twisted. ‘He’s lang gone.’

‘What dae ye mean, Cissy?’

Her hands on her hips. ‘What dae I mean? Whit’s it tae you?’ She spits on the pavement at my feet. ‘Ye wasnae thinkin... naw, surely ye wouldnae, ye stupid bitch, ye. Christ, I willna waste guid words. Get yersel oot o here. Wull was in a bloody foul mood when I last saw him. Whit would ye expect? He’s gone for guid this time, if ye ask me, and maybe that’s the best thing.’

‘I dinnae understand you, Cissy.’

‘God help his poor wife. It’s her I’m aye sorry for.’

I feel myself begin to sweat.

‘His wife, Cissy?’

The door’s closing but her head pokes round it. ‘Oh, ye didnae ken, did ye nae? Fancy that, and you sae clever, sic a smart ane, wi a column in the newspaper and everythin! Aye, Wull’s wife. The lassie maybe didnae hae the bittie paper, but my God she put up wi mair shite frae my brither than you hae in ye. And that’s saein something.’

Extract II: 'But how do I say it?'

Chapter 7 – May, 1930

The mattress remembers my shape. I lie in the warmth, a weight of blankets over me. The pillow's firm, my breathing slow and even. Noises from the kitchen. I turn to the wall, eyes still closed. There's a dance of light on my eyelids: shapes blur and merge. I drift.

The top stair creaks. That hinge needs oiled. Ethel's feet clip across the linoleum. She's wearing shoes. A teaspoon slides across a saucer as the tray's put down.

One hand will be twisting the lock of hair behind her ear.

'Marion.'

Enough-of-this-nonsense voice. She knows I'm awake. If I move now, just stretch a little bit, it'll be all right. The moment passes.

'Marion?' Last syllable held.

A loud whisper: 'Marion.'

Half-light. Amy's crying again and mama's walking the floor: Ethel's in a white nightgown, beside my bed.

'Go back to bed.'

'That's what mama said.'

'What is it?'

'The baby woke me.'

'She'll settle soon.'

'It's not fair.'

'What's not fair?'

Ethel shows her teeth. 'My tooth was there when I went to bed, but when I woke up it'd gone.'

'It'll be under your pillow.'

Her wail a fair copy of the real thing, but from the wrong place. 'I swallowed it.'

Sharp points poking through her gum. 'There's another tooth coming.'

'I don't want a new one. I want that one.'

I lift the covers.

She slips in beside me.

'It's all right, dear.' My arms wrap all the way round her and more. She snuggles in and catches my hand. Her hair smells of lavender water, her feet are warm between my thighs.

A prod on my shoulder. I stir, sit up on one elbow. My mouth has learned the shape of mama's smile. 'Ethel, dear! What time is it?' I attempt a yawn. It comes out a sigh.

'Thought you were never going to waken.'

She's ready for church, except for coat, hat, and gloves. Her hair's pulled flat against her head. One lock behind her ear has escaped.

The curtains are yanked open. Sunlight splays across the bed. 'Breakfast!' She's lifting the tray, thrusting it at me.

I arrange my arms and legs.

Tea poured, she folds her arms.

'Thank you, Ethel.'

'My little "welcome home" to you – if you like. Since I was in bed when you got back.' A rusty sound to her voice.

'Sorry to be so late.'

'Rather expected you on the earlier train.' She opens my wardrobe door, makes a show of brushing dust from the lapel of my suit. 'I ironed your white blouse.'

‘You didn’t have to do that.’

‘Don’t suppose you’d have done it.’ She watches me chew. ‘Toast all right, is it?’

‘Not too cold?’

It’s hard to swallow, when she’s watching. ‘Lovely, thank you.’

The dress I’d taken off the night before is lifted and shaken then hung up. Ethel brushes the seat of the chair and perches herself on it. ‘So? Tell me all about it, then. Did you have a good time?’

I remember snippets of the speech I rehearsed on the train, even though I knew I’d never say it. ‘Oh! Busy.’ I say. ‘The tea’s lovely! Thank you.’

She studies the photograph of papa, the one on my dressing table.

‘I find it very difficult, I must admit. You know, if I could just write poetry.’

She pretends to be baffled.

I grope for words. ‘This, you know, this – “Would you be interested in....” Polite conversation, when people actually aren’t interested at all. Sometimes you feel you’re invisible.’

My hand-mirror, comb and brush get arranged in parallel lines. ‘But, Marion, did you have any success?’

‘Well, nothing definite. Not yet.’

The extent of my failure defined by a spread of fingers.

‘Waste of time then?’

‘Not entirely, dear. I followed up that contact in the BBC. Something might come from that. And started a new poem, on the way home!’ I lift the tray, push myself back against the pillow. ‘The train stopped at Lunan. It was getting dark by then of course. Couldn’t see much. But ... remember the fun we used to have there?’

‘I suppose “The BBC” will mean another trip.’

‘If anything comes of it. Of course I can’t guarantee that, not yet.’

‘Well then. Not a lot to show, for a train fare we can ill afford.’ She walks to the window, stands with her back to it. ‘And Margaret? Robert? I suppose they’re well?’

‘Margaret’s much better. Her housekeeper’s been a gem, she says, while she was ill.’

‘Local girl?’

‘Yes, actually.’

‘Someone we know?’

‘Remember the Greigs?’ She shakes her head.

‘You must remember Cissy Greig? Same class as Margaret and me?’

‘Ah! Those Greigs. A big family? James Street? Went to our kirk? Yes, I remember. Something of a hovel they lived in?’

‘They’d a lot of bad luck. Anyway, it’s Cissy’s daughter.’ I’m prattling. ‘Cissy died – no, I didn’t know at the time. Margaret took the girl in, trained her, and it’s turned out very well. Made herself quite indispensable, she has.’

Ethel’s hands clasp behind her, pulling her shoulders back.

‘You all right, dear? I didn’t mean to bore you. They send their best regards, by the way, Robert and Margaret.’

She gestures. ‘I’ll take the tray, shall I?’

I’ve left a triangle of toast. ‘Fine. Thank you so much.’ The feeling that I’ll never tell her makes my mood sink.

‘Ethel, I don’t want to go to the kirk today.’

I hear the gasp. ‘But Marion, I haven’t been out since you left.’

‘But, dear, you can go.’

A hiss. ‘You know I won’t.’

‘I’m really very tired...’

‘Tired? You’ve just wakened. I’ve been up for hours. Done the housework – nothing left for you to do.’

‘It’s being on the go all the time, and sitting on the train – my ankles are swollen.’

‘Poor darling!’

I know better than be taken in.

‘Don’t tell me! You’ve been in Greenock for what... three days? And Amy didn’t bring you breakfast in bed once! Oh, shame!’ The tray thumps down. ‘How silly of me not to realise. And what an ordeal ... your dear brother-in-law took you to the station, did he? All the way from Greenock to Glasgow, in the new car – must have been so tiring!’

I tell myself not to interrupt. Let it wash over. Please God, it will wash over. Please God...

Papa comes down to the level of the congregation. Not a rustle, not a cough. He raises his arm, makes the sign with his fingers. His voice so certain.

... the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, rest on and abide with you, now and ever more.

I breathe his voice in, and out.

Like a gentle rain from Heaven. Like a gentle rain from Heaven.

No. More than mercy. Love, that’s what it was. That’s what it is. That’s what papa lived and breathed and sent into the world. Still sends. How does he do that?

She’s saying something.

‘A stop off in Arbroath – tea with friends? Some people haven’t been back to Arbroath for years, you know – but then, you never think of that do you?’

‘Ethel, dearest...’ I stretch my hand out but she won’t even look me in the eye. I can’t do this much longer.

‘Not so much as a “Sorry I was late home, Ethel Mary”, or “Thank you, Ethel Mary, I knew you’d have supper waiting for me.” ’

‘I’m sorry, Ethel.’ It makes her worse if I cry. I pull myself together but there’s a pain in my lower back now and I can’t think what else to do. There’s no way to make it right.

‘Look at you. And not even “I hope you kept well, Ethel Mary, while I was away?” ’

‘I’m sorry, Ethel. I’m sorry. That was selfish of me.’ I wipe my eyes on the sheet as I push it aside. My legs and ankles twice the size they should be. ‘There, look, my legs are much better for a night’s rest. I’ll get up and go with you and the exercise will do me good.’

‘You’re pathetic.’ Her breathing’s shallow. ‘You know that?’

‘I know dear. Just give me a few minutes?’

‘You’re trying to humour me.’

‘No. I want to come. It’s a beautiful day. All I’m worried about ... ’ No escape now I’ve started. ‘It’s just... are you sure you’re feeling well enough, today, dear?’ I fold back the bedspread. ‘A walk in the hills, instead? This afternoon? You’d like that, wouldn’t you?’

‘That’s what you’d like.’ She brushes her hand across the desk, scattering my things on the floor.

‘Ethel, dear...’

‘Don’t “Ethel, dear” me! My name’s Ethel Mary.’ She paces the room. ‘You entice me to this... this godforsaken place to live, and if you’re not scratching with your pen you’re rushing off to town or you “must” go to this meeting, “Ethel dear”, or that meeting, “Ethel dear,” or “I’ve been invited to give a lecture, Ethel dear” – as if I care – or “so and so’s invited me out to lunch, Ethel dear” – I wouldn’t come, even if you did ask me. All you talk about is poets – dead poets.’

‘Don’t get so upset, darling.’ My voice is shaky. ‘I didn’t mean any harm.’

‘Who says I’m upset? “I must see my publisher today, Ethel dear”: “I’ve a committee meeting in Glasgow, Ethel dear”: “I’ll stay with Amy for a few days, Ethel dear – poor Amy isn’t well at all, Ethel dear.”’

She’s shouting, and that could be a sign the storm’ll blow itself out.

‘If it brought in any money, well that might be different. I could understand, perhaps.’ She stamps on my notebook. ‘Poetry this and poetry that and poetry the next thing. Poetry, poetry, poetry. All you care about.’

Another chance to tell her. ‘That’s not true, Ethel Mary.’ I swing my legs out of bed, but they’re unsteady and the moment passes.

“Not true, Ethel Mary.” Well, that’s what it looks like from here. And if it isn’t poetry it’s Margaret’s bad back or Amy’s ... imaginary whatever it is. As if we hadn’t all been through that already.’

‘It isn’t imaginary. If you saw her, you couldn’t help but be sorry. All these years and she’s never given up hope, not until now.’ I link my arm in her arm.

‘She’s not the only woman who wanted children.’

‘I know that.’

‘So wrapped up in herself she never thinks of anyone else. Never has done. Never will.’

I can’t be seen to agree.

‘Neither of you do. You say you want a companion and then you go gallivanting all over the country and leave me behind. You don’t want a companion. You want a ... a housekeeper – so you can be upsides with Margaret Corstorphine.’

Miss Williamina – Minnie – Matthew. ‘She’s my friend,’ I want to say. ‘She’s kind. She loves to read my poetry and she likes walking on the hills with me.’ I ask if Ethel’s taken her pills yet.

‘Why would you care?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘Don’t make me laugh. You don’t care. Don’t pretend you do.’ She shrugs my arm away. ‘All you care about is that I pay my share of the expenses.’

‘Shall I fetch them?’

‘You think I’m a child?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Don’t touch me! I’m fifty-four, for Heaven’s sake. I’m not a little sister any more.’ I nod. ‘In the war I saw things you’ve never dreamed of. You’ve forgotten that, haven’t you?’ I think I should have stopped, but my head’s still nodding. ‘And what did you do? And you think you can tell me what’s for?’

‘I know what you did. It must have been terrible.’

‘Don’t understand, do you? Don’t live in the real world, not like the rest of us. Terrible? Huh. Soldiers – real men, real gentlemen.’ Her face twists. ‘And they. Needed. Me.’

‘But for someone as sensitive as you...’

“‘Tea and scones?’” That what you offered? “‘Would anyone like some tea and scones?’” Dear God, Marion, you never could bake, not even scones.’

‘If I’d been younger, I might have done something more worthwhile.’

‘Who ever needed you?’

Outside the trees are covered in blossom. 'I do hope we get a nice day.'

'My soldiers appreciated everything. They did. Every smile, every word, every time you tucked in a sheet.'

'Papa would've been so proud of you.'

Her chin points up a little.

'Ethel, what if you were to get in touch again with some of the other nurses ...?'

'Bit late, isn't it?'

'You could invite them for tea.'

'What for?'

'Or to stay.'

'Why would I invite someone here?'

'Just to be friendly, dear.'

'Friendly! I'm on my own here, day after day. What do you expect me to ... often as not no-one to talk to.'

'But Ethel... I thought you liked being on your own.'

'Tell me when I said that.'

'You like to listen to music on the wireless. And you don't like being interrupted when you're sewing.'

'Sewing! You call that "sewing"?''

'You do excellent work.'

'"Alterations and mending – anything considered?" You call that work?'

No point in asking her to keep her voice down.

'Mother'd turn in her grave if she knew. And you could easily get a real job.'

Someone's in the next-door garden. I reach out to close the window but can't stretch.

‘You said we’d have enough to live on – comfortably. More fool me to believe you.’

I face her again. ‘It’s not my fault, Ethel. It’s happening all over, people losing money. Lots of people are having to make do. We haven’t done too badly, really, not yet.’

‘Well I’ve had enough. I’m sick of it. Sick of it!’ She stomps towards the door. ‘And I’m sick of you.’

I try to find the sleeves of my dressing gown. Her feet thud on the stairs. At least she doesn’t fall this time. Even though I’m half expecting it, the din in the kitchen comes as a shock. I cover my ears but that can’t shut it out. A lull and if I’m lucky that’ll be it.

It starts again, the doors of the cupboards banging in turn. Less fiercely, I think, this time, more of a rhythm and I hope that means she’s coming round.

I’m almost at the kitchen door when I hear the thud. A pause, another. ‘No Ethel!’ I push myself between her head and the wall.

‘Sick! Sick! Sick!’

Everything’s hurting, not just where she punches but I manage to hold on. I can’t let go, not yet. We fall to the floor – a chair’s knocked over. I pin her wrists and cover her body with mine. My weight – for all it is – keeps her down. She’s cursing, but doesn’t mean it. She’d never say these things if she was well.

From this angle I see a broken crossbar on the chair.

She’s quivering. I ease one hand away and want to stroke her hair off her forehead but don’t risk it. I dry my face with my sleeve. At last – five minutes? Longer maybe, I’ve no idea – she’s quiet.

‘Let me go, Marion.’

I ease back. A bruise on her cheekbone’s spreading fast. The slightest pinpoint of light in her eyes. I sit back on my heels.

That's it. Over. Not too much harm. I'll put a cold compress on the bruise. I think I say 'It's all right, dear,' but I'm not sure whether I say it aloud. I reach for the kitchen table to pull myself up. My hand pressed against the table-top, I help Ethel to her feet.

The bread knife's lying where she sliced my toast. She picks it up. The knife makes an arc as it comes down and pins the joint of my finger to the table. I don't feel anything. The cut edges of flesh turn inwards, so it doesn't bleed, not immediately, not even when she pulls the point of the knife out.

The sun slants through the kitchen window, this time of day, this time of year.

A ring at the doorbell.

I hope, if we're quiet now, they'll go away. They mean well, but Ethel will be fine, all the better if we're left alone.

It rings again.

She sinks to the floor, wraps her arms round my legs. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Marion. I didn't mean it. You know I didn't mean it.'

The lavatory's just there, behind me, off the hall. Room enough for me. I could bolt the door and stand with my back against it.

'It's all right, dear. It's nothing.' A red flow across my palm. I hold the edges of the wound together with my teeth. The blood's warm. The taste isn't unpleasant.

Ethel's face is hard against my knees. Hairpins stick out at angles from her hair. With my good hand I push it back off her face, replace some of the pins.

Chapter 8 – May, 1930

The bus drops me near the entrance. People in a hurry, trying to get out of the rain: all eyes down. Two weeks of rain without let-up we've had, and everything's sodden. The hem of my coat chafes my calves, the rim of my hat's tight against my forehead and I could wring out my gloves. How can they bear it here, Amy and Walter? The manse so damp, nothing ever dries.

A gap in the traffic. I pick my way over sludge in the gutter.

Because my hands are full, I push my back against the door, squelch my entrance on the tiled floor. As I shake myself down, another visitor pushes past without looking to left or right. The swing door shudders back.

I didn't notice how high the ceiling was, last time, how bare the walls. But at least it's dry and warm. A smell of floor polish. I ask the man behind the glass where to go. His accent's difficult to follow but he takes pity on me, summons somebody to show me the way. Following her back along a panelled corridor, I apologise for my wet feet. She doesn't acknowledge me. A heavy bunch of keys bounces against her thigh. Her feet splay out.

There's a place I go sometimes.

Wide open moorland. I'm walking in perfect balance, feet hardly touching the ground.

She stops at a door, doesn't need any of her keys.

The day-room's brighter than I expect, and airy. Chairs, armchairs, tables. Women and men sitting by themselves or in groups. Murmured conversations. The wind's throwing rain at the window panes. It's quite rhythmical.

There was a hotel in Brussels Margaret and I stayed in once – a long time ago. The salon was much like this. Ethel's sitting by herself, beside a window. Her hair's been trimmed. It's softer, round her face. Her needle's busy.

'Ethel!'

She doesn't hear me.

I come from the side, notice the forward lean of her frame, the angle of the neck, the profile – the pointed chin. Ankles crossed, legs tucked back. Could be mama, sitting there. 'Ethel?'

She raises her head – needle poised. I kiss her forehead. She looks beyond me.

My mouth's as dry as I am wet. 'Sorry, dear, I'm soaked through. You can't imagine what it's like out there.'

No reaction.

'No, don't get up, dear. I'll sit over here.'

She reminds herself where the next stitch begins as I look for somewhere to put my wet coat.

I settle myself and click into pleasantries. 'I'm so pleased to see you looking well.' I hold onto the smile as long as I can. 'It seems very comfortable.'

Only her hands move.

'And you're all right? You keeping well?'

Gaze still fixed on her work.

'I'm so glad to see your parcel arrived safely. I know how you put your heart into your embroidery. That's why we thought it best to post it, when we got the message – so you didn't have to wait.' I glance around. Everyone else is intent on their own business – if there was a pianist playing in the room it'd just be like that salon in Brussels.

I move the chair forward. 'And did I choose the right threads?'

She ignores me.

It isn't easy to distinguish patients and visitors.

'Won't you show me, Ethel? What you're working on?'

The rain's less heavy now. I can see trees in the grounds, recognise the shapes of larch, horse chestnut, beech. A public building, on the skyline – a spire or clock tower, my eyesight not good enough to tell the difference.

I wonder aloud if the sky's beginning to lift.

'William? Amy?' she suddenly asks.

Her needle's going in and out of the tapestry. The weight on my chest shifts, settles back, heavier than ever.

'Of course.' I'm on the edge of my seat but compose myself enough to reassure her. William and Amy send their love – lots of love – every good wish: Ethel's constantly in their prayers. Amy was so sorry she couldn't come today, not very well, her nerves bad. I say it can't be healthy to live so close to the river – and the rain never stopping.

There are lots of other people asking for her of course – I reel them off. And did she get a letter from cousin Flora in Aberdeen? She said she'd write. Is there anyone she'd like me to write to? Would she like some notepaper? And was she remembering about the cottage on Skye? Don't worry, I tell her, the lady was most understanding when I cancelled the booking. We can go another time, though it's so wet on this side of the country maybe we should go south instead?

Her lips are pursed.

I don't give up but my voice sounds more and more forced. 'And here, Ethel? Everything going well? It seems ... pleasant.'

I think she's going to say something. The moment passes.

Tearful, but compliant she was, when we brought her in, thanks to William. And the doctor was pleasant, offering a 'thorough assessment' that'd put things right in no time.

‘Just like Walter said, it’s very well appointed. And ... the care? Is that as good as he expected?’

If she’d just say something. If I could get through to her.

I try a different tack.

‘We used to have such fun, when you were little. D’you remember, Ethel? Amy a baby, and mama busy all the time. Remember Cissy and me taking you to Carlinhaugh? You played in the rockpools all afternoon, but wouldn’t come into the cave.’

It doesn’t ring a bell.

‘You used to bring your picture books into my room and pretend you were reading, while I did my homework.’

‘Yes, that’s it. Everything’s an act.’

I’m so taken aback, my scarf slips from my shoulders.

A raised voice across the room. ‘That’s the Colonel.’

‘A military man?’

‘Most colonels are.’

‘Not someone you knew in the war?’

She thinks if she doesn’t speak it isn’t a lie.

I know her too well. I follow the movement of clouds across the sky. ‘I’m glad mama didn’t live through the war years.’

My turn to look away.

‘It was lovely, though, wasn’t it, when the war was over and we moved into our little house.’ I’m baiting a trap for myself, but there’s nothing I can do about it now. ‘To have that companionship...’

‘You were always in your room, you know.’

‘But just to have someone there, you know, if we wanted to talk.’

‘You were always ...’

‘We ate together, Ethel. We sat together in the evenings. You’re forgetting.’

‘Scribbling. You were always scribbling.’ Her voice sharper than the kitchen knife.

‘I think the rain’s stopping.’

She smirks.

The Colonel’s story finishes. There’s a burst of laughter that seems out of place.

‘You didn’t even want me to join the VAD. You didn’t want me to go.’

‘No! I was anxious for you, that’s all.’

She slides a new thread into the eye of the needle.

‘D’you remember that last concert we went to – the Philharmonic, in Aberdeen – Tannhauser?’ I say. ‘Wasn’t so very long ago. Remember how good it was?’

Storm and sunshine on the seas

amongst the furthest Hebrides.

‘Of course I remember.’

I ease the pleats of my skirt into place. ‘There was a violinist with a beautiful face.’

She studies where to insert the needle. ‘I don’t know what you’re getting at, always hinting at something or other. And why didn’t William come?’

‘You mean today? Oh! A meeting – an important one – of the Session.’

Me doh rae soh. Half past two.

She looks up from her work. ‘You’d better go then.’

‘No dear, it’s not time yet.’

She threatens me with the needle.

No-one else in the room's moving. I half rise, smell lavender in her hair. 'I've just arrived, Ethel Mary. I've been on two buses and it's taken me an hour and a half.'

'I didn't ask you to go to any trouble.'

'But I wanted to. I wanted to see you.'

She jerks her shoulder away.

Something unyielding inserts itself into my back-bone. 'And I'm sorry, Ethel, I didn't mean to bring this up, not yet, but we'll have to talk about it sometime, so it may as well be now. We need to decide what to do about the house.'

She controls her expression.

'We'll sell it. I think that's what you want, anyway, isn't it?'

She drops her embroidery, cowers back. 'Get away from me! Leave me alone!' I reach out but she struggles and her glasses are knocked off. They slide across the floor. People are looking. 'You take everything from me and it still isn't enough.' Her arms shield her head as if she's expecting a blow. 'It'll never be enough. You hate me!'

'I don't, Ethel. I don't.' She covers her face with her hands and moans.

A nurse is coming over. 'Ye all right lass?'

It's Ethel she's speaking to.

'Didn't I tell you?' Ethel says.

It takes me a moment to react. 'Ethel...'

'Leave me alone!' She clings to the nurse. 'She didn't even let Walter and Amy come.'

'Dinnae fret, now.' The nurse puts an arm round her waist and steers her away. I don't know what to do but pick up the specs and the embroidery and make the needle safe. I lay everything on the table. The verse I'm looking at is almost finished:

Life out of death

Joy out of sorrow

The Cross today

The Crown to...

I hope there is a heaven, for her sake. I hope papa's there to say he's sorry.

Purple shadows under his eyes. 'Ethel was mistaken. A misjudgement, that's all. Walter's explained everything to me and I've explained to her. She'll get better, you know, with our prayers. She'll understand, in time, why we had to send her away.' He presses the fingers of both hands into his temple. 'I've a terrible headache.'

I say he should rest.

'I must write to her,' he says. 'Before I do anything else. Have you written, Marion? Sent your love?'

I want to push myself in front of him. 'Papa, look at me!' I want to say. 'You never look at me now. Have you not noticed anything? Do you not want to know what's wrong with me?'

I need to ask him how you comfort someone else if you hurt so much your body doesn't work properly and everything's an effort – limbs heavy – you can't think straight, don't know where to go, what to say.

I should tell Ethel, if I write, she was lucky. The worst pain – worse than being betrayed – is not knowing why.

I want to shake papa and say I know he's upset – everyone's upset, for goodness sake. And what a dilemma for him, in his position, if the scandal gets out, I know he's worried about that. But part of me wants to slip in: 'if only you knew what you've been spared.'

It's a tragedy for Ethel but it isn't Walter's fault. He's been showing such promise in the ministry and about to try for his own parish... well, maybe he'll leave that aside, for a few years, until things settle down. Amy'll be prepared to wait for her wedding. She can, can't she, now she's got what she wants?

Papa's face seems to freeze for a second then his pen dips into the inkwell. 'You should write to Ethel. She'd like that, you know, a letter from you.'

His last words.

Ethel didn't like my letter. Not at all.

*

Carved panels on the front of the doctor's desk. His hands are toying with the string of a binder – the only thing on the vast expanse of surface. 'Such a pity. Your sister's doing so well.' One foot taps the floor. 'This seems quite out of character.'

It's always wise to smile. 'She seemed quiet, to begin with.'

'We pride ourselves – in this hospital – the prognosis for voluntary patients is usually very positive. Of course we protect them – let's say from those more degraded in habit.' He pulls the string and takes some papers from the file. 'But, perhaps it was a blessing in disguise, this little incident – some insight. You understand?' He checks my agreement and attention over the top of his spectacles. 'Here, in trying to explain a person's predisposition to mental illness, we subscribe to the psycho-biological school of psychiatric medicine.'

'My brother-in-law recommended the hospital very highly. I was so hopeful you could help my sister.'

He nods. 'A compassionate man. Now. What I want to say is that the physical and psychological cannot be divorced.'

'I understand.'

‘Psychosis – or neurosis – relieves tension in the individual.’

‘Yes. I see.’

‘A tension which comes from elsewhere. Well, that’s the task. To analyse the personality of the patient – your sister Ethel – and to consider what external factors may have affected her, or are affecting her.’

‘Of course.’

‘Our aim being to free her from suffering, to allow her to function normally.’

‘That’s what we all want.’

‘So, for example, her dreams of ...’ he’s checking the notes – ‘being burned alive’. Now, as you know... you’re in the dream. You may represent some aspect of the personality – the creative, perhaps? You’re a poetess, I believe? Beautiful image, isn’t it, her mind has conjured up – the Muse as bearer of fire – the force of ultimate destruction.’

He seems pleased with this vision, stares at the blank wall behind me. I don’t like to interrupt.

‘Fascinating. Perhaps a fear of creativity itself – the chaos of creation?’

He remembers I’m still there.

‘Of course, we mustn’t forget the actual experience of the patient – past and present.’ He draws himself up and reminds himself I’m there. ‘Things she’s done. What do you think, Miss Angus? What may have left a strong impression on her mind?’

‘Well, I’m not sure.’

‘Come now. Just think about it. Fear and fire. Where could these two things have come into conjunction with one another, and Ethel?’

‘Well... I suppose you mean her war service? But – that was more than ten years ago.’

‘Some of us in the medical profession advised against young women being sent to front-line field hospitals. Grotesque places, for those with delicate constitutions.’ He leans

back, folds his arms. 'And now we, and they, suffer the consequences. Her hospital came under heavy bombardment, didn't it? You see what I mean?'

'Well, yes.'

'Her injury... not a gross disfigurement, of course, but perhaps enough to...'

'I do see what you mean.'

'A memory, constantly triggered by a reminder – the facial scar? – becomes an irrational fear.' He lets his pencil scan down the page, taps at a paragraph. 'So far so good.' His chair swivels and he looks out the window. 'But there's something else we'd like to get to the bottom of. And we think you're the very person to help. The idea that she's "wicked", this assertion that you – you, her sister, who might be expected to care for her, to love her, that you think she's "evil". You 'hate' her. Now, may I ask? Can you cast any light on that?'

I spread my hands, palm up. 'I've never given her reason to believe that. On the contrary, I ...'

He stops me with a hand held high. 'You won't mind though, if I just ponder aloud, for a moment?'

'Of course not.'

'Why, I ask myself? Why one particular person?'

'I haven't done anything...'

'No. Now please don't take this personally. This is no slur on your character. We're just trying to build up a picture, and from what we see, she's never been violent with anyone else.' His pen taps on the notes. 'You can confirm that?'

'As far as I'm aware.'

'And no-one else has even seen her 'violence'? Heard the disturbance yes – your neighbours, I understand. But it's always when the two of you are alone.'

'We live together, doctor.'

He plays with his pen. The top joints of his fingers are long.

‘She won’t do anything, go anywhere, unless I’m with her.’

I watch him write this down.

He looks up at last. ‘Nothing then?’ Tap, tap with the pen.

‘Nothing.’

‘When you and your brother-in-law brought her to the hospital she’d some quite serious contusions.’

I nod.

‘Perhaps you could remind me, now we’ve been able to talk to her... if you could just give me your version of events again. Of what happened, that morning. And please, remember, you can talk in complete confidence. You know, if you lost your temper or something... don’t be afraid.’

I tell him what happened.

‘That’s the way it was? You’re sure?’

I tell him I am.

‘Is there anything you disapprove of, anything at all. In her manners, behaviour? Anything she may have picked up?’

‘No.’

‘Perhaps – subconsciously, of course – you resent something?’

‘Not at all.’

He has a way of waiting when he thinks there’s something more to say.

‘There was one thing she resented... but it was so long ago.’

‘Mm?’

‘She... when she was a young woman.’ I wish Amy had come. ‘She took it very badly.’

‘Badly?’

‘Yes.’

It’s none of his business. I should have more sense. But he’s waiting and watching and I have to say something

‘Father died. Of course, we all took it badly. But it was very sudden, and Ethel was away at the time. In England. Mama made me write.’

I say I can’t do it.

Mama takes the handkerchief from her eyes and tells me it’s wicked to be wilful at such a time and God knows what she’s done to deserve this. It’s my responsibility – nay, my duty – since I’ve chosen not to take a husband when she’s done all she can to encourage me and now I’ll have to buck up and stop pretending I’m something I’m not, wandering on the hills as if I don’t have a home to go to. Yes, I’ll have to put my gallivanting days behind me now, and it’s just as well... None of us will have a home now because the presbytery will need the manse for the new minister. It’s impossible to say yet how much money father’s left although one thing’s sure – it won’t be enough to keep paying Ethel’s fees at the hospital. That’s three daughters on her hands – she starts to sob again – only one of the three spoken for – and another minister wasn’t quite what she’d hoped for. If I’d only married well, as I could have done, she’d be looking forward to a comfortable old age instead of who knows what.

I stare at the blank paper. ‘But how do I say it?’

She says, well that’ll be a challenge for me won’t it? Even people who fancy themselves as writers or poets sometimes have to come right out with something and just say it, straight, no nonsense. ‘Your father’s dead. You’ll have to come home.’

‘But...’

‘No.’ she adds. ‘Say... “ as soon as we can make arrangements”. We can’t have her at the funeral.’

The altar and choir gallery swathed in black: dignitaries, parishioners – people from all over the country. I didn't want them there. I didn't want black horses to pull the coffin. I didn't want people lining the streets. I didn't want the smell of hawthorn blossom, didn't want to see upturned grass and bare earth and baby George's grave dug up.

Ethel must have asked a nurse to post her reply. Barely legible, it arrived the day of the funeral.

'I told Amy this would kill papa.'

'Yorkshire, it was. She couldn't get back in time.'

He's interested.

I make light of it. 'Goodness, that was thirty years ago!'

He looks grave. 'Interesting, though. Who knows the workings of the mind? Ours is a young science, but we're learning all the time. Yes, I admit, all the philosophies, all the religions of the world – yes, they all accept that death can be a great teacher. But which of us speaks with certainty? Perhaps it'll be the honour of the psychiatrist to unlock the secrets.'

My eyes want to close.

'I must thank you for being so frank. It's very important to be frank.'

I smile, half-hearted, try to remember what I just told him.

'You harbour no antipathy to your sister?'

I don't hesitate. 'Certainly not.'

'Right.' He checks the notes again. 'Let's talk about a different aspect of the case.

You recall the conditions of the voluntary patient?'

I'm not certain.

'As a voluntary patient Ethel can give us notice to quit. Three days – that's all that's generally required. And if she does that, well we'd feel inclined, you know, to let her go. That's really why I wanted to speak to you. Our willingness depends on the obligator's – that is your – willingness to receive the patient.'

'You think she's quite ready, then?'

'Perhaps you don't want her home?'

'It's not that...'

'I must stress, Miss Angus. Your sister gives us no trouble. Some slight confusion, worries – depression – hardly surprising, I'd say. And, if you think of her war experience, not unusual.'

'You make me hopeful.'

'I must tell you, she's quite a favourite. Biddable, helpful to the nurses. Some of them had war service too, one in the same hospital as your sister, though it was after her time.' His fingers slide down the pen. 'To be blunt, Miss Angus, as far as we're concerned, Ethel could go home today.'

I play with my gloves.

'But – you understand, stability is very important. And she needs to feel wanted. Now I'm not sure sure how how you'll feel if – I should tell you we've talked to her about this. She'd prefer to stay with Mr and Mrs Nicol when she's released. But of course I wanted to check with you first, to see what you'd think about that arrangement.'

'Stay with Amy?'

'A fresh start. It's what she wants – but of course you'd all have to agree.'

'My sister – Amy – doesn't keep too well.'

'Might even be a good thing – can you see that, Miss Angus? Make Ethel feel needed, give her more purpose. Perhaps you've tended to ...'

It's a bleak, high moorland I'm on, and all the bonnier for that. An outcrop of ancient rocks set in bracken and heather, rounded hills and a wide valley, a brown burn flowing through clumps of twisted trees; the rustle of a breeze through grasses; a taste of the sea on the wind. I feel as if I can fly.

He leans forward. 'Miss Angus? Are you all right?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Well, anyway, I wanted to let you know what our thinking was. Perhaps you'll raise the matter with Mr and Mrs Nicol?'

I nod.

'We'd take it gradually, of course. We've a new rural retreat – a 'half-way' house – for the milder patients. We'd like to transfer her there – perhaps for a few days to begin with. Why don't you all take her there this Sunday? We'll let them know to expect you. You can walk, sit in the garden, talk things over. The grounds are beautiful! And if she likes it... well we can be flexible.'

'I'm not sure whether Walter and Amy will be free on Sunday.'

'Do talk it over with them.'

Chapter 9 – May, 1930

I settle back into the pew, my good ear angled to the pulpit, to the timbre of Walter's voice. His words make the air resonate. I wonder if all trace of his accent has gone.

‘We ought, then, every one of us, to approach with confidence ...’

Just a vestige of the north-east in his vowels, if you know what to listen for. A natural pause in his sermon. The organist clears his throat. Others do the same. I know if I cough I'll never stop. The woman beside me jostles with her elbow, holds out an open bag of boilings.

‘And if our ears were tuned ... to eternal harmonies...’

Walter's an orator, like papa was. I fumble. My sweet drops to the floor. One bounce, two. The noise tails off.

‘we should hear it in the voices of the day – and of the night;

we should hear it in the sunshine and the storm;

in the trees of the wood... as they rejoice before the Lord;

in the waves of the sea... as they dash upon the shore;

in the thunder as it rolls and mutters among the hills;

in the cataracts... as they fall.’

The congregation settles into drowsiness. This is the only place I hear anything like poetry, these days. I try to remember whether Walter's voice was always so measured and calm but all I can think of is how charming he was when papa first introduced him, how interesting he seemed.

‘Three very handsome young ladies in this household,’ he said.

How lucky, the congregation of the parish kirk, we three thought.

The taste of mint, my throat on fire, and I'm back in Erskine Kirk. Robert and Cissy there, in their pews. I see our constellation, three points on a circumference. Margaret across from me, not quite one of us, in the beginning.

The dying peals of the bells, the beadle processing down the aisle. The pure tone of the precentor; the swelling of sound as the congregation joins in the psalm, and I can sing as loud as I want to. My voice rises with Cissy's and Robert's, with all the others, to the high domed roof space – painted blue with gold stars – above papa's pulpit.

I drag myself back. Every head is bowed but mine. Walter's praying at the altar. His patch of thinning hair shows.

'Strength and wisdom' – pause – 'and patience'.

The binding of my bible's faded and frayed. I will Walter to carry on.

He remembers the poor, and all those whose circumstances have been reduced – 'through no fault of their own'. And those who are sick' – pause – another rustle from my neighbour, who was sorry Mrs Nicol was missing another service – 'in body, and in mind'.

One of my thumbs scrapes at the cuticle of the other.

Mama's voice: 'A girl who doesn't know what to do with her hands is a pitiable object.'

Walter asks that we might all – each and every one – be held in the warm light of God's love.

The edges of my Bible merge into its shadow. If I close one eye then the other – a trick from my childhood – it jumps from side to side.

At lunchtime Walter and Amy don't look at one another.

I tell Walter it was a lovely service, compliment Amy on the stew.

She nods curtly.

‘Amy,’ I say. ‘Please don’t worry. If it happens, I’ll be here to help. I’ll do anything I can.’

She pushes cabbage around her plate, her knife scraiking against the china.

‘I’ll find somewhere to stay nearby.’

A look passes between Amy and Walter. Walter tells me not to even think about another place to live, there’ll always be a bed for me at the manse.

Amy looks horrified.

‘It might not even come to anything,’ I say. ‘You know what Ethel’s like. And absolutely nothing’s been decided yet.’

‘I can’t do it. Won’t.’

Walter gets in quickly. ‘We must, Amy, if that’s what the doctors recommend. They know best.’

Amy humphs. ‘What if we tell them what it’s about?’

‘I don’t think that’ll be necessary.’

I think she’s going to cry. ‘You can’t make me have her here,’ she says.

‘It’s the least we can do.’ Walter puts on his pulpit voice. ‘We have a responsibility, Amy. We must take it seriously.’

She stares into the distance.

I concentrate on the hallmark of my fork. ‘Don’t think for a minute it was my idea, Amy.’

When I look up, She’s wiping her eyes. ‘All these years it’s been hidden’, she says, ‘like some dirty secret. But it’ll have to come out now.’

‘Amy, there’s no advantage in bringing it up.’

‘I don’t trust her. Not one bit.’

‘She’s unhappy, that’s all,’ Walter coaxes. ‘We can be mature, can’t we? Surely we can provide her with some little comforts. Marion’s already shouldered more than a fair share of the burden.’

‘Ethel’s cunning.’

I look away.

‘She needs someone to care for her, that’s all. And what if we turn her away? What will people say? Good grief, I’m on the Hospital Board.’ His cuff links get adjusted. ‘I’m sure everything’ll work out. What if Ethel were to get involved in the Fellowship? It’d take work from you – might be the making of her. Remember how she used to organise bazaars?’

Amy’s quiet. Walter thinks he’s won her over. He includes me in the conversation.

‘Yes, let’s all do this together, one step at a time – this afternoon the first.’

Amy’s face flushes. She says nothing.

‘I’m going this afternoon,’ Walter says. ‘I’m taking Ethel out. And you are, Amy. We’re just taking her for a run in the car, for goodness sake. What could be more normal than that?’

He checks with me. I agree. ‘Marion’s coming too. See? Despite everything, she hasn’t given up.’

Amy glowers at me, plays with a griggle on the tablecloth. ‘Marion’s different from me. Always has been.’

I tell myself not to make a scene. ‘Oh, I know, I know, dear.’ I push my chair back and stand up. ‘You don’t like my opinions, what I wear, the way I cut my hair. You never have. You don’t approve of my friends, my habits, my poetry. I always go my own way. Right?’

‘Rather overwrought, aren’t you?’ Amy says.

The chair slips back easily under the table, just so. ‘Ah, but, Amy... “If you prick me, do I not bleed?”’

‘What d’you say?’

‘Nothing.’

‘I hate it when you do that. Is that from one of your poems?’

‘A play, actually. *Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare.’

Walter rises. ‘Amy, we must stop this. And you must come. You owe it to Marion – and to me.’

A sneer. ‘And to Ethel, I suppose?’

‘You know I’m right.’

‘And you know I’m not well.’

‘I make very few demands on you, Amy.’

I stand up to go.

‘But on this occasion I’m going to insist.’ He checks his pocket-watch. ‘I’ll get the car ready. Back in twenty minutes. The fresh air will do you good.’ His smile to me is just on the surface. ‘And don’t worry, Marion, we’ll see this through.’

When he’s gone Amy rests her chin on her fists. ‘Well, this’ll be cosy, won’t it?’

Liver spots and blue veins on the backs of my hands. The wound still pink: edges taking their time to knit together. ‘He’s trying his best, Amy.’

‘What would you know?’

My voice finds an old strength but I’ve only a vague idea of what I’m saying.

‘Well, you’re right there, of course. What would I know, an old woman, never married?’

But let me tell you something. Never assume anything ... about anyone.’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘No you wouldn’t.’

She begins to clear up.

'I'm not finished yet.'

With the scraping and stacking of the dishes, I lose the jist of what I want to say.

'Love's not like a pie that gets smaller the more it's shared.'

'You're being ridiculous.'

I can't think of the right metaphor, but neither can I stop. 'It's more like a muscle that gets stronger the more you exercise it.'

'You know nothing.' Her napkin's folded and rolled.

'Maybe so.' My teeth are on edge. 'But I'd hate to be bitter, like you.'

'I just wish I knew what you did to make it all flare up again.'

The plates clatter together.

'It's all your fault anyway, Marion.'

'Meaning?'

'I should have known better than listen to you. You and that old gypsy Nellie whatever-her-name-was and her stupid ideas. I should never have tried that stupid trick with the smell ... I should have let Ethel have him.'

*

Someone's put lipstick on Ethel. She submits to my hug, gives Amy an awkward embrace. Walter's hand's enclosed in her two. She runs her fingers over the bonnet of the car, touches the lights, the wipers, the RAC badge. 'It's beautiful. And so well kept. Tell me what kind of car it is, Walter?'

'Morris. Saloon.'

Her hand rests on the door handle. 'May I sit in front?' She looks at Amy. 'Not for the journey, just to try it.'

Walter smiles. 'You don't mind, dearest, do you?'

Amy knows better than say she does.

‘Thank you so much. I feel much better already. And to have you here! I can’t tell you what that means.’

Walter opens the door.

Ethel settles herself in. ‘What a lucky woman you are, Amy!’ She plays with a switch. ‘What’s this for Walter?’

He explains in detail.

‘Oh, they all try to be kind, you know, in there,’ she says. ‘But I won’t dwell on it, not today.’ She points to a dial. ‘Now, do tell me, Walter. What’s this one for?’

Amy stands so the door can’t be closed.

Ethel strokes the dashboard. ‘It’s been such a long time since we went out together in the car, hasn’t it.’

‘Not so long. Marion and Walter brought you to hospital in it.’

‘I wasn’t well that day, Amy.’ She recovers her calm. ‘Now I’m better. And you’ll see. It’s going to be a lovely afternoon.’

Walter puts an arm round Amy. ‘My dear, why don’t we let Ethel travel in front? She’ll get a much better view of the countryside.’

‘No, really, I just wanted to try the front seat, see what it was like.’ Ethel picks her handbag from her lap and swings her legs out. Pauses. ‘Well, just if you really didn’t mind, Amy?’

Walter steers Amy towards the back seat. ‘It isn’t too much to ask, dear.’

Amy’s climbs in. I walk round to the other side. Walter holds the door open for me too. ‘For pity’s sake, Walter, let’s go.’ I say. ‘Let’s get there, get it over with.’

Everything looks fresher when we leave the city. The sky opens up, the fields are green. Hawthorn blossom’s out, by the roadside. Even Greenock looks more interesting

from this distance, with the Clyde separating us. A merchant ship, pilot alongside, goes upriver. Ethel's quiet. I tell myself not to worry.

Walter points out Dumbarton Rock. If it weren't for him there'd be no conversation.

My attention's taken by a track following the shore.

Thirty miles, the doctor said, and once we turn off the main road, we're there before we know it.

Amy says we've passed the entrance.

Walter signals and pulls into the side, manages to turn the car. 'Yes', he says. 'You're right Amy. How could I have missed that sign?' He manoeuvres through the gate.

I admire a bank of rhosidandrums.

Amy tuts and wonders why I persist in using such old-fashioned words.

I don't bother to reply.

She turns her back to me and looks out the car window.

'Almost there, sweetheart,' I hear from the front. I glance at Amy but she hasn't heard.

Ethel's hand's resting on Walter's arm.

I think he may not have noticed – he's concentrating on the narrow drive. But I'm sure I heard correctly and need to do something.

I grip Ethel's shoulder. 'This looks like a grand place to recuperate.'

The tires crunch on gravel. 'Lovely place for a wedding,' she whispers. Walter shuts the engine off. Amy's still looking out the window. I don't know what to do.

Someone's been watching for us because the front door of the house opens. A lady waves. Walter steps from the car and acknowledges her. Ethel sits with hands folded until he goes round to open her door.

She steers him towards the house.

I follow close behind, leaving Amy getting out of the car.

‘I’ve waited so long, dear,’ Ethel’s saying.

Walter looks over his shoulder at me. His face is white.

‘She’s up to something.’ Amy catches up with me. ‘He’s so gullible, the idiot. I knew it. I knew no good would come of this.’

‘Come on,’ I say. ‘We’ll split them up.’

Ethel and Walter are talking to the lady at the door already. Walter’s trying to disentangle himself.

‘... my fiancé,’ Ethel says. ‘And the doctor said everything would work out just the way I wanted.’

Walter’s stunned. I push in. ‘How do you do. I think you’re expecting us? But... would it be all right if ... we’d like to walk round the garden before we come in. If that’s all right?’

The woman’s relaxed. There’s no problem, she was going to suggest it.

‘Thank you so much,’ I link my arm into Ethel’s and pull her away. She struggles, but I find the strength.

‘Can I help?’ the woman says. ‘Would you like someone to help?’

‘No, really. Thank you. It’s just, we need some air. Stuffy in the car, you know.’

‘Oh, we’re very informal.’ She shoos us away. ‘Follow the path. It’ll take you all the way round the estate. Half an hour, maybe. Pop into the walled garden as you go – it’s very restful. Then we’ll have tea, and I’ll show you the accommodation.’

‘Ethel, you’re confused.’ I say, when we’re out of earshot.

‘This is nothing to do with you.’

‘This is part of the hospital. The doctors thought you could recuperate here.’

‘I know that.’

She calls back to Walter. 'Come and help me, dear. If only you knew how tiresome she can be!'

'Stop it Ethel!'

"'She'll make trouble,'" I told you that once, didn't I?' She stops suddenly. 'No, no. That was Amy.'

'Ethel!'

'Hush, Marion. Everything'll be fine. Just stop interfering.'

I look back. Amy's agitated, talking to the woman at the door.

'Please, let's just have a nice afternoon, Ethel. A walk, a cup of tea, cake.'

Walter comes up behind us. She pulls herself away from me. 'I want to be with Walter.'

He tries to prise her hand off. 'Please, Ethel. You know how much I care for you. Amy and I both' He looks to me for help.

'Ethel, we need to talk about what we're going to do. You know, when the doctors say you're ready...'

'What's to say? She's had him long enough.' She calls back over her shoulder. 'Still want a baby, do you, Amy? A dear little thing? A girl, is it?'

Amy crumples against the doorframe.

'Oh, Walter, just look! Can you see her? So miserable! But we'll let her stay.'

His face is burning.

'Tell her, Walter, for God's sake.'

It wasn't papa's place to say it. It should have come from Walter. And he has to tell her now, for himself. He's to say it straight, the way he should. The way it was, the way it is.

I don't love you. Never loved you.

Walter looks at me, puzzled.

Ethel waits to hear what he has to say.

Walter touches her cheek. His face says he wants to take her pain away... of course he loves her. Doesn't he love all of God's creatures, the sick and the lame as well. If only she'd understood, things could have been so different.

'This is so unkind to Amy,' I say. 'Don't be unkind.'

'Or what?' She gives me a hard, straight look. 'Is that a warning? Is it?'

'You need to stop this.'

Her voice calm. 'Everything's going to work out.'

Walter grasps at her words as if there's hope in them. 'What d'you mean, Ethel?'

'Oh, you know, I can... some people can. If you try hard enough. You know, sometimes. You can make things happen – or not happen.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Ask her. She knows. She'll tell you.'

Walter looks to me.

I shake my head.

'It's not the way you think, dearest. Not broomsticks and cauldrons and cats. Not like that. Just – a kind of prayer. The same as papa used to say – "if you pray hard enough..." and are patient. I've been patient, haven't I?'

Nellie fills her pipe and tells me it doesnae pey tae meddle in whit ye dinnae understand. She tells me a tale o a wee lass wi her faither, watchin fower ploughs workin i the fields.

'I could stop all thae ploughs,' says the wee lass.

'Show me,' her faither says.

She says some words. Three stop. 'The ither ploughman must hae put a sprig o rowan on the halter,' she tells her faither, 'Tae keep the horsie safe.'

The man has his dochter bled tae death by a surgeon. Her auld nurse is burned at the stake.

Ethel sidles up to Walter. 'It was her fault, in the beginning – if it hadn't been for her none of the bad things would've happened. Papa got very upset. He'd to send her away.'

She's pointing at me.

'Ethel, it was you who went to Scarborough. To the hospital.'

'Stop! Stop!' Walter's saying, and something about the power of love.

I see myself in the distance, a tiny figure scrambling up the slope of a hill, on the edge of a range that stretches to the horizon. I'm almost hidden amongst the bracken, making good time. I can do that.

'Amy's right,' I say. 'I don't know anything about it. My love was never good enough.'

Her arms are round Walter's neck. 'I'll lift the curse on Amy now,' she's saying.

It's nae whaur ye've been, it's whaur ye gae next, that matters.

If I can find that path down by the river I'll keep walking upstream, get my rhythm back. I'll get there, to that place. I can do that. I can go.

Extract III: 'I swear it, by my deed'

Chapter 10 – May, 1945

A bracken-covered hill at sunset, the ruins of a sheepfold. I count foxgloves, pause at the cry of a peewit.

Someone pokes my shoulder. Jolted awake, I'm muddled. My eyes search for light, settle on small rectangles of light – the blinds are pulled well down to keep out the late spring chill. My hands need a rub, to get the circulation going. The fire's only lit in the evening.

Still, that's me through another winter.

'Telephone message for you. A Miss Matthew.'

The woman's monotone sets me on edge.

'Coming to see you.'

I reach for the 'Press and Journal', crumpled at my feet. A wheel squeaks: cups rattle on a trolley. From the smell, the tea's stewed, and that's one blessing. 'Who?'

'Miss Williamina Matthew.'

I grope under the cushion for my pen. My knuckle scrapes the wooden frame of the chair. I cradle the sore bit.

'She said you'd remember her as Minnie.'

She wants me to look at her but I don't give her the satisfaction. 'Minnie? I was Minnie, once.'

She slows her speech so I'll understand just how difficult I am. 'Miss Minnie Matthew. From Arbroath.'

'A long time since I was there.'

'She said she worked for your friend, Mrs Corstorphine.'

I'm staring at my open hands. 'Margaret's dead'.

‘Miss Matthew said you didn’t go to the funeral.’

‘No.’

‘Most people like to show respect, when they’re still able.’

Some of the other residents have perked up. A relief of tedium always welcomed.

I count the number of patterns across a curtain and the number of rows in the length and multiply by two for each window then four for all the windows in the room.

‘Real fun. Funeral.’ I can’t believe it foxed me, such a simple anagram.

She frowns.

‘The crossword... today’s P & J.’ I stretch but still can’t reach. The headlines scream from the floor and I want to believe the world will be a better place, but I’ve heard it before. Who can say what’ll happen next? The end of a war is a time of reckoning for everyone.

She leans over, scoops up the newspaper with one hand, pinches my arm with the other.

My face is used to hiding pain, but it takes me aback, that she thinks she can hurt me like that.

She beams around the room, straightens the pages of the paper, lays it beyond my reach. At last something like vigour in her voice: ‘I took the liberty of telling Miss Matthew you’d be at home on Friday.’

*

A warm, firm handshake, the same open face. I’d have picked her out in a crowd. She’s hesitant – a candle flickers before the wick catches – in the way she says hello.

Miss Minnie Matthew. She'll have brought me a 'minding' from Margaret's jewel box, and it'll be churlish to say I've no need of a brooch. The lassie could've posted it and saved the train fare so the least I can do is accept, and thank her very much.

I'll ask about them, Robert and Margaret, for auld time's sake. Then that'll be that.

I unlock my fingers when I see her eyes on them, brush away a crumb.

The family likeness more marked than I remember. She's thinner, that's why. We all are, on rations. Grey in the hair she used to twist in a bun with one hand. An old style for a young lass, I used to think, even one with an old head on her shoulders.

She must have said something. She squats at my feet, waiting for an answer. 'Ye mind me, surely?' Her face below mine. 'Dae ye no?'

I'm tongue-tied.

A bit of grit pulled from the corner o her eye. 'At Mr and Mrs Corstorphine's?' The nervous laugh. I remember that too.

She stands up and looks round at the other folk in the room. A friendly wee touch on my shoulder. She's wondering if I'm teasing.

If I'd that much life left in me!

'You do so mind! Up the glen. Fine you do.' The words are surer than the tone but there's intimacy in her voice.

I don't want her to think I don't remember. My head nods.

The lines at the side of her eyes crinkle up.

At last I can speak. 'Miss Matthew, my memory may no be what it was but I can understand mair than ae phrase at a time.' It isn't what I want to say but it's a start.

'Listen tae you!' She gives me a hug.

I've forgotten how it feels. I pick at a worn patch on the arm of the chair.

Her smell's clean and sharp.

‘If ye just kent whit I’ve been like! A hen on a het griddle.’

My face still pressed against her coat. Vinegar, that’s what the smell is... the nap of her collar’s been refreshed with vinegar. She feels me loosen, steps back.

‘What is it?’

‘Just... your turn o phrase. It’s guid tae hear you.’ Vinegar. Isn’t that, that mindfulness... isn’t that just like her? ‘I mind the door-bell,’ I say.

A brass angel, wires through hoops, and while I’m trying to work out what to pull or push the door opens. I jump back. The beam on her face fades. She gives a hint of a curtsy then covers her mouth and says she’s sorry she didnae meant tae fleg me, she could kick hersel, she should hae waited for the bell but she heard me arrive and the butterflies in her belly...

I say ‘How do you do?’ and she says Mr and Mrs Corstorphine are very, very, very sorry but they were summoned this very afternoon tae the notary for a bit o business, and there was nothin they could dae but go. She bobs up and down again. She’s tae look after me and she’s sorry, she kens she’s nae very guid at curtseys yet – she’s gey new – but Mrs Corstorphine says it’s respectful and she really wants tae mak a guid impression.

I ask if she’d let me come in then.

She’s sorry for keeping me on the doorstep and picks up my bag and ushers me inside. The house is even grander inside than out: everything solid and smooth and polished. I admire the panelling, the line of the stair, the curves of the balustrade. Light floods into the hall through the stair window. My hand rests on a Chinese vase.

‘Ane o a pair.’ She points out the other, in an alcove at the other side. ‘Mr Corstorphine brought them back frae his travels.’

‘Miss...’ It’s been a long time, but I slip back into it. ‘You hae the advantage, Miss...’

'Oh, for the love o... backside foremaist as usual!' She holds out her hand. 'Miss Minnie Matthew. Housemaid at Inschdowrie. Pleased tae be o service.'

'I was called Minnie, when I was wee,' I tell her.

She's made rock buns. We eat – 'In the kitchen, please', I say – then go to the turret room.

My fingers trace the leaded panes. I take in the view up the glen; the lower slopes of the hills; a glimpse of reed beds, of the lochan, of a fairy knoll on the other side of the river.

She checks the surface of a table for dust. 'I gied it a richt guid clean for ye comin.'

Below, the garden: shrubbery, herbaceous border, a path leading into a clump of silver birch. 'Mrs Corstorphine kent you'd like it here.'

'Aye,' I say, 'she was right. I like it.' If I pull the table across to the window, nobody can come into the house without me seeing. If I keep the door ajar, nobody can climb the stairs without me hearing.

I suggest to Miss Matthew that if she's bidin, she should take her coat off.

Without as much as a 'by your leave' she goes to the windows. 'Better wi some licht in here.'

The blinds are raised: the curtains pulled back as far as they'll go.

'There.' She pulls up a chair and settles herself in front of me, takes one of my hands in hers. 'I hoped, ye ken, but I wouldnae hae been surprised if you'd forgotten. Me just a housemaid – you a famous poetess.'

'What a blether ye are!' My voice surprises me – something like life in it – and the words are coming easier.

'I thought ye were famous.'

‘That’s a different thing.’

‘You were on the wireless. I didnae ken anybody else that had been on the wireless.’

‘I’ve given it all up. Poetry.’

She holds her head to the side. ‘Aye, I’ll believe that.’

‘No, I have. Plain speaking’s better. If you’ve somethin to say... just say it.’

She gives my hand a good-natured shake. ‘Ach, awa wi ye!’

I find myself laughing. ‘It must be, maybe, what? Fifteen years?’

‘Since we first met? Aye, must be. And dae ye mind the first time we went up yon hill? Mr and Mrs Corstorphine awa for the day – you helped me wi the chores, then we climbed tae the lochan?’

‘I mind.’

‘You pointed tae a cave on the cliff and said that was whaur the last wolf in Scotland had its lair. And me, I’d never been higher than the Law in Dundee... God, I sweated. You near twice my age, and never tirin. But I was determined. I huffed and puffed and kept gaein.’

‘That’s what you’ve to dae, sometimes.’

‘And when we went for a swim. Ye mind that? You took yer claes aff and waded richt in and splashed aboot. “The water’s fine”, ye said and the fleg I got, it was that cauld. Then you tried tae mak me float.’

‘I mind holdin the back o your head.’

‘And you swam richt across.’

‘It’s a wee lochan.’

‘Ye made it look easy.’

A lull. ‘I’d forgotten the cave.’

‘The pity was you didnae come mair often tae Inchdowrie.’

‘Miss Matthew, Minnie, these were difficult times, for me. But what I’ve always remembered, what I mind best, is that you were very generous.’ She takes my hand. ‘Wi your time. And your friendship.’

‘It went the baith weys.’

‘Things were very hard, for me, for a time.’

‘I ken that. Yer sister.’ She looks away. ‘Just... I’d hae liked ye tae keep in touch, even if that was all.’

‘I can’t just blame Ethel. I lost my ain wey. Gettin through every day was a struggle.’

‘You didnae even answer my letters.’

‘Dinnae think... I didnae ... I moved about such a lot. I didnae get all my letters.’

‘You were ower saft,’ Mrs Corstorphine aye said, ‘for your ain guid. Aye takin on ither folk’s problems.’ She clears her throat. ‘She said it was a tragedy, you cuttin yersel aff, the wey ye did, frae yer best friends.’

‘Margaret said that?’

‘Often she’d a worry about you. And Mr Corstorphine. But he said “We must respect Marion’s wishes... whatever she wants. She kens fine our door’s aye open for her.”’

Bracken fonds pushin through the debris o the auld year. I’m waiting for Minnie, my back against a stone. A buzzard wheels above: far below, a slow sweep of figures across a field – the occasional flash of sun on sickle blades. Grasses whisper in my ear.

Robert, a faded deerstalker on his head, strides across the horizon. He sees me, hesitates, veers in my direction. He crouches in the shadow of the stone to pick a flower, holds it out to me, keeping his eyes on it. ‘Linnaea Borealis.’

I cup my hand.

He lays the stem on my palm.

'It's bonnie.'

His hands round mine. 'Like you ...'

I warn him off.

Eyes wide, he puts a hand across his mouth – mock horror. 'No, don't worry, Marion. I won't say anything silly. It's just... I'm pleased to see you. We both are. It makes Margaret happy to have you here.'

The flower limp. 'It's so fragile, Robert.'

'But it survives. In these wilds. It thrives in the shade.'

Two crows skraik as they chase the buzzard away.

Robert looks down at me. 'You won't say anything, will you?'

'No.'

'I know you won't.'

'Never.'

He gestures at my book. 'And you're not going to spout poetry at me, are you?'

'I didn't like to impose.'

'After he died, Mrs Corstorphine lost hert a bit. She'd relied on him that much.'

'I did write, when I heard.'

'Aye, she said.'

'I didn't think there was anything I could offer.'

'Friendship would hae been enough.'

She takes my other hand and lays the two of them between hers. 'What's that?' she says. 'How'd ye get that?'

'I bruise easily, at my age.' I pull my sleeve down. 'I didn't mean to hurt Margaret. I just... I didn't want to be a burden.'

‘Now listen. Dinnae tak offence when none’s intended. Of course ye didnae.’ She looks at her watch. ‘Listen, I’ll better tell ye how I’m here. It’s maybe daft, turnin up like this.’ Her fingers tap a rhythm on the chair. ‘I could’ve written, but – ach – I thocht... “she’ll ignore a letter.” ’

‘Well?’

‘Mrs Corstorphine, afore she died, she tellt me tae think about it.’

‘About what?’

‘Look, I dinnae ken whaur I get my brass neck, but Mrs Corstorphine said, what wi you and my mither bein the best o pals and she kent how much I liked you – and your poems – and thae bein sic terrible times, what was the point in haudin back. I’d nae family tae speak o and you’d nae family and the twa o us would get on that well thegither.’

‘Margaret always liked to...’

‘Aye, look after ither folk.’ She leans forward. ‘She’d a hert o gold. Well, listen, this is it. I’m nae sure how ye’re placed, but ... ach, I’ve a plan micht just suit the baith o us.’ She pauses to take a breath.

I don’t dare speak.

‘Maybe this time it’ll work oot.’

Chapter 11 – June, 1945

Private hotels are all much of a muchness – if anyone should know that, it's me. The setting here was what made the difference: just knowing they were out there, the hills, the moors, on the doorstep.

I went back to Glen Dye, for one last time. Took the bus from Banchory. The landscape bleak – and bonnie. My legs slow to begin with but I stopped and rested beside the water – was tempted for a moment, no more than that, by a still deep pool. But Clach-na-ben beckoned and I thought, just once more, and summoned everything to keep going. I made it to the top, hoisted myself up the tor, foothold by foothold, inch by inch to the very spot where the witch is buried. Wull and I used to meet there. He'd come up from Deeside and wait for me, watching the horizon, as I crossed over from Glen Esk.

From the tor, the Water o Dye was nothing but a line, like something drawn on a map, and the pool a black dot, nothing of consequence. My eyes swept the slopes to the sea. From this distance it looked still, but I knew well the tide would be dragging at the shingle, waves would be crashing against rocks, the wind would be spraying salt spray over somebody's hard won fields.

Lightsome on my feet, I stretch my arms out. My body's in perfect balance. The wind tugs at my sleeves...

I close my eyes for a second. No, no. I didn't try to fly, not that time. The picture in my head's a younger me. I didn't get off the bus – hard enough getting on, the step so high. But people were very kind. A wee girl moved out of the front seat for me and when I changed my mind the conductor said 'Aye, ye're wise. That's a bitter wind frae the west.' He didn't charge the extra fare to Fettercairn.

So long since I'd anything to say, my breathing's shallow. I summon an image of papa – the way he stood in the pulpit, shoulders back, hands resting on the brass rail. I don't often think of him now.

My chest expands, air fills my lungs. 'There's something I want to tell you.'

Conversations between the other guests stutter to a halt. A sentence trails away, unfinished. They lean towards me.

'I'm going home. To Arbroath.'

Sideways glances between neighbours.

'At the end of the week.'

They're waiting. Disbelief – shock, even, on some faces. I feel myself sitting up straighter, almost warm to them. 'I've engaged a maid – a kindly lady's maid.'

Everyone talks at once. 'You're leavin us?'

'Don't you like it here?'

'Sic a risk!'

'After so long? It was just before the war, wasn't it, you came?' Her brows furrowed.

'None of us as fit...' looking round for support. 'And, your health, Miss Angus?'

'Whatever's got into you? Where will you stay?'

A spark, as from a flint. 'A very fine house – sandstone's warmer than granite, don't you think? Traditional. A pleasant area of town, near the abbey. And if I remember rightly, a fine view of the sea.' The smell of sea air.

'And – did you advertise?'

'How well dae ye ken her, this maid?'

'Excellent references.' I'm thinking clearly again.

'And, you've no fear something might go wrong?'

A fire rekindles in me. 'Fear? I've no fear of anything any more.' I see its shape on the page.

When little's left to hope for,

The less will be to fear.

'But... are you sure you're doing the right thing?' That from the far end of the table.

My voice cuts through the hush. 'Does anyone ever know what the right thing is?' I scrape my ration of butter to the edges of my bread.

Feet shuffle under the table.

*

Now I'm on the train I believe it.

Out there on the platform, the world. Women fuss over hair or collars, twist headscarves. One leans against a wall, looking at her feet. She checks a packet of Woodbine. A train pulls into the next platform so I don't see if she takes one. People spill out from the train, swamp the platform.

Minnie's making sure the bags are secure.

'I don't suppose I'll ever be back in Aberdeen.'

'Maybe aye, and maybe no, and maybe I suppose so. Never say "never", my mither aye said.' She's checking the tickets. 'Mind, I'll maybe nae be back masell. It's gey dour in the rain.'

'Be fair, though. The granite fairly glints in the sun.'

'But it's nae my hame.'

‘It was “hame” to my mama. Not to me. I’ve aye thought o Arbroath as hame.’

She puts the tickets away in her purse.

‘It’s a wonder you and yer sister, aifter the war – the last ane, I mean...’

‘The one tae end all other wars?’

‘Aye, well. But, I was thinkin, it was a shame ye didnae buy a wee hoose in Arbroath.’

‘It wouldnae have been a good idea.’

‘Ye was doon Edinburgh wey, afore, was ye nae?’

‘The Borders. My war service– if you can call it that – was in a POW camp. The recreation tent. It was through the kirk, of course. But oh dear! A dreary place in the winter.’

‘Gey bleak in Arbroath tae. I was still at school and all the young lads, they just disappeared. And them that came back, well...’ She shakes her heid.

‘Lonely... God knows how the prisoners felt.’ I’m thinking aloud. A couple on the platform wrap themselves round one another. A wave, a shout, and another pairing off. A toddler pulls at the hem o his mother’s coat. ‘Robert – pure chance – came to the camp, now and again.’

She interrupts the song she singing under her breath. ‘Robert? Did he?’

‘Not often. Through the university. All sorts of educational classes – not just practical things – languages, philosophy, history, botany, for the prisoners.’ The wee boy’s lifted high but his back arches away from his father. ‘We sometimes met in Hawick for tea.’

‘That would hae cheered ye.’

‘It’s comforting, a familiar face.’

My feet are sinking in sodden earth but I find a tussock to stand on.

'God-forsaken place,' he's saying. 'But you're right. Impressive.' He estimates the height of the stone with the palm of his hand. *'Twice as big as I am' – spread-eagles himself.*

'And wider than you can stretch.'

'A riddle without an answer.' He tries to pull me back into his arms.

A slant of light. 'There are theories,' I tell him. 'The stones mark forces, powerful forces – magnetic – that shaped the earth.'

His expression warns me.

'But you'll know all about ley-lines.'

'Not a jot of scientific evidence, of course.' He moves across to touch the stone.

'Pure Speculation.' He's close into the stone, scanning the surface from base to top.

'Jesus.' He half falls, half stumbles back.

I stretch out an arm so he'll regain his balance.

'Jesus, Marion, I thought the thing was going to fall on me.'

'It's the way the clouds are moving.'

'Jesus.' He leans his forehead against mine.

'A guilty conscience, that's what it is.' I rub the tops of my arms.

'You're cold.'

'Aye.' I trace a symbol on the surface of the stone. *'Maybe our ancestors knew something we don't. Maybe they could tap into ... energy? Whatever it is. Draw on some invisible power?' There's a depression under my fingers that might be part of the pattern or might be a random carving by wind and rain. 'It's not so far-fetched.'*

He gives me a hooded look.

'Maybe the evidence is there but we can't understand it.'

The carriage door slams.

Minnie singing the words of her song now, pointedly.

Until our hearts begin to sing again.

‘You can’t turn the clock back, Minnie.’

She shakes her head. ‘No, but...’

The blast of the guard’s whistle.

Your eyes will tell me all I want to know,

When you come home once more.

‘You’ve to be careful though, with eyes. Sometimes you cannae see beyond what you want tae see.’

Damp greatcoats, a fusty smell in the carriage. Everybody on the edge of their seats, thinking their own thoughts. Farmhouses, fields, villages pass us by. An unexplained stop in the middle of an empty landscape.

Robert studies his diary.

My notebook’s held close to my chest. I turn the pages, read what I’ve written. This may not be the final draft.

The suburbs are flashing by now.

Robert’s looking at my reflection in the window. I turn a little. He sees I’m watching and opens his mouth to speak. I shake my head.

The train pulls into the station. We busy ourselves fastening coats, collecting belongings. As I step down, Robert holds his hand out as if to help me, but pulls me towards him. I don’t like it, the tweed of his jacket rough against my skin. We’re jostled.

'It's over, Robert' I say. 'For good this time.'

A shout from the platform. Minnie stops her song to peer out. A man runs past the window, his raincoat blowing behind him. He climbs aboard the carriage next to ours.

The door bangs.

At the final whistle the engine draws the train through a cloud of smoke and steam.

'Well, there we are. That's us.' Her face beams.

'You take after your mother. She'd a lovely singin voice.'

'My mum? Did she?'

'Sang like a lintie...'

'Dinnae think I ever heard her sing.'

'The ballads, that was her thing. Her and Robert used tae sing at school concerts.

The voice, she had, for all the size o her! You wondered where it came frae. I aye wished I could sing like Cissy.'

'Well, but your poetry... it's lyrical ...'

'A poor imitation.'

'Everybody can sing.'

'No, no, lass. A pure voice, frae the heart, that's a gift. It speaks tae anybody, intoxicates you. Poetry, now ... that's craft, a skill folk learn. Even words pulled frae the marrow o the bones dinnae hae that same power.'

The train's gathering speed.

A dinghy's adrift on the river. There's a flutter of nerves in my stomach. 'What is it they say? "Haste hinders guid counsel".'

'Ach, I should hae gien ye langer tae mak up yer mind.'

'No, no. I meant, I hoped you wouldnae regret this – what ye've got yerself intae. You hardly ken me, really.'

‘Course I do! There’s nae chance I’ll be sorry.’

The rail-line’s skirting the coast. The tide well out.

‘Ethel didn’t like Arbroath.’ Perhaps I mumble. Minnie doesn’t answer. There’s no visible scar but I find the spot – top joint, index finger, left hand. The skin’s thicker and it’s numb if I press. I ask her what she’d have done if Margaret hadn’t given her a job, all these years ago?

‘I’d hae winkled ye oot somewey.’

‘No, but seriously. What if – so many possibilities, aren’t there? Take, for example, Margaret and your mother and me. We all knew one another, we all knew Robert. What if your mother had married Robert? That would’ve made a difference tae your life.’

‘My mum did the best she could for me.’

‘Oh, lass, I didnae mean any criticism.’

‘Mr Corstorphine wouldnae hae married her oniewey.’

‘Your mum liked him. They used tae sing thegither.’

‘I cannae think o naebody didnae like him. But he was... well, put it this wey. My mither was frae workin folk.’

‘What if I’d married Robert?’

‘Ye’d hae been a damned lucky woman, so ye would. But I dinnae think ye’d hae had much chance. Mrs Corstorphine, she ance tellt me she’d aye kent he was the ane for her, frae when she was a wee lassie. He didnae aye ken it, she said, but ... she’d hae scarted yer een oot for him.’

‘You could be right.’

‘Mr Corstorphine never said. Aboot singin, I mean, wi my mither.’

I straighten my coat across my knees. ‘Maybe he didn’t remember. It was a long time ago.’ The ring on my finger slips easily over the knuckle. Back and forward, back and forward. ‘You never call yourself “Williamina”.’

‘Mum aye called me Minnie.’

‘Your grandfather, you’ll be called after?’

‘My Uncle Wull. I never kent him though’

‘I met him.’

‘At my gran’s?’

‘Maybe at a dance, sometimes – a great fiddler, he was. But I hardly knew him, really.’ I fumble with the clasp of my handbag. ‘Not what he was like as a person. A loner, I think.’

‘Is the catch stiff?’ She takes my handbag and opens it. ‘There!’ I stare at my purse, handkerchief, comb, compact, perpetual calendar in leather case stuck at some point in the past. ‘Everything all right?’

‘Fine. Thank you.’ An express passes in the opposite direction. I close my eyes against the noise.

When I come to, Minnie’s reading the *People’s Friend*.

The landscape’s familiar. ‘The North Esk made a new course for itself, when I was a bairn.’

‘That right?’ she says.

‘Aye. Some night, it was. The tide on ae side and the river on the other, and between them they forced a new wey though the dunes. Where the river used tae be, nothing but marshland.’ She looks back, but we’re off the viaduct now, amongst fields of barley.

The train stops at Montrose. A skein of pink-footed geese rise to wheel across the sky.

She looks across the mudflats. ‘My Gran bade ower there.’

‘Aye, Dun Estate.’

‘Mrs Violet Jacob comes frae The House o Dun.’

‘Aye.’

‘Dae ye think she’d hae kent my Gran?’

‘She did.’

‘Really?’

‘Aye, your Gran used tae speak about her. You’ll have read Mrs Jacob’s novels?’

‘And her poems. I like them.’

‘You’ll be invitin her to stay next?’

‘Marion!’ The train teeters along an embankment. ‘I dinnae think she’d hae kent my mum though.’

‘She was older than your mum.’

‘And gey posh, I suppose.’

‘Maybe.’ I close my eyes again and Cissy’s there, right beside me, skirt bundled round her waist, up to her knees in water.

I tell her my mama will not be pleased.

‘Awa! Ye’re stuffy as a quilted hen. Even Miss Violet wasnae feart tae ploiter in a burn.’

‘Well, just you go back to Dun, Cissy Greig. Go and play with Miss Violet if that’s what you want.’

‘You are jeal – ous. You are jeal – ous.’

‘I am not.’ With fingers like thumbs I tear at my laces.

‘Ye are sut. Ye are sut.’

‘You told me you knew how to speak properly.’

She sticks her tongue out.

The boot comes off. I throw it at her, but she ducks and it falls into the water. We both laugh.

'Come on,' she says.

I slide down the bank.

'I didnae even like Miss Prissy Violet. Wull and her aye left me ahent.'

We're on the last lap. The curve of a bridge. A long way down children play in a patch of sand beside a river. I push my hand against the glass.

Minnie leans forward, touches my knee. 'You all right?'

We rush headlong into a cutting. My print fades. 'Minnie, I want to be cremated.'

She presses a finger in the hollow of her neck, the way Cissy used to.

'These things have tae be talked about.'

'But no now. No the day.'

'You'll see tae it, though?'

'Whit a woman!'

'The ashes scattered on Elliot Sands.'

'Dinnae go sayin things like that!'

'There's nobody else tae tell, now. Just you.'

'But, will ye nae get yersel settled in afore we speak aboot cairryin ye oot?'

'You're right,' – I nearly say Cissy – 'Minnie.' I catch her wrist: 'I get goose pimples, you're so like your mum!'

'Mum used tae say I was the image o Uncle Wull.'

'The Greigs were all alike.' I push my hat back off my brow.

'Ye're ower warm. Let me.' As she loosens the top button o my coat, the back of her hand brushes my chin. 'Sorry.' she says. 'Is that better?'

‘Much.’

‘You’ll tell me what my mum was like – when she was wee?’

‘I dinnae think I can tell you mair than you know already. Wull had left hame by the time your granda had his accident. That was why your mum had tae leave school. To earn a livin, keep the family thegither. It must’ve been hard for her, she’d a sharper brain than any o us. And gumption! She’d such gumption. But after she started at the mill, she didnae want tae mix wi us. We all just... we let things slide, I suppose. Lost touch, in the end.’

‘That’s whit happens.’ She’s looking out at a sweep of sand.

‘I walked hame from here once.’

‘Tae Arbroath?’

‘It was a fine night. But aye, your mother. I only ever saw her at the shops, now and again, after that.’ I jiggle the face o my watch though I know the hands will never move again. ‘You’re sure your employer’s happy about this arrangement?’

‘Ye’re no gettin nae favours!’

‘At any rate it winnae be for long.’

‘Stop it, will ye?’ She tucks her hair up. ‘This suits everybody. I tellt ye, housekeepers are hard tae find – especially anes as guid as me. Aye, and so’s the money tae pay them, and near everybody in the same boat.’

‘I’ll pay my way, Minnie.’

‘Wheesht. Of course ye will. And my new mistress is gettin what she wants, a lodger and a bide-in housekeeper.’

‘And I get tae come hame. But you, Minnie?’

‘You ken fine what I get. Twa half-time jobs maks a full week’s wage.’ She’s counting on her fingers. ‘I get a place to bide and, best thing yet, I get time tae spend wi

you.’ I smooth my gloves so they don’t look as if my hands are still in them. ‘What mair would I want?’

A loose thread. The thumb splits from the palm. ‘Never fear, I’ll stitch that.’ She studies the seam. ‘Looks like a life line, does it nae, turnin for hame?’

‘You read palms?’

A doubtful expression. ‘Dinnae need tae. Just trust me. Things’ll work oot. If I’d my ain place, I’d tak ye there. Just the twa o us.’

The train slows as we pass the ruins of the abbey then judders to a stop. ‘Three-score years and ten, since I first arrived in Arbroath.’

Minnie reaches for my bag.

‘I hope it’s no too heavy a burden for ye.’

She opens the carriage door, sets the bag on the platform, comes back for me. Her hands steady me at the elbows.

Seagulls are screeching.

I let her take the weight, tilt my head back, draw in the smell o brine.

Chapter 12 – April, 1946

On fine days Minnie sets me in the garden. The man next door leans over the fence for a blether, but his wife's still grieving for the young lad that didnae come hame. The postman passes the time o day. My hearing still picks up the buzz o bees, the call o birds, wind in the branches o the birch.

I protest to begin with, but Minnie borrows a wheelchair and takes me along by the shore. The voice o the sea separates into the lappin o waves on rock, the grind and pull o shingle, the splash o water against the harbour wall.

Ordinary folk o the town shake my hand, as if they're glad tae meet me. The minister frae my father's kirk visits. He loves poetry. I hear his compliments and only sometimes lose the thread o conversation. He brings other folk.

At lunch one day the lady o the house wonders if – perhaps – I'd prefer... It might be more convenient for me to entertain my guests in the sitting room upstairs.

I tell her I don't want to be a burden... but the view from that window!

She leans across the table. 'My dear, it's such a pleasure – an honour – to have you here.'

I think – for a moment – somebody else has come intae the room.

She worries it's no quite what she had in mind – but perhaps – she fidgets wi the salt and pepper pots – it might be better for me. I might even prefer ... it occurs to her there's nae reason, as long as Minnie isnae busy – why does Minnie not eat with me, in the evenin?

She minds yon foldin table in the scullery, takin up space that could be put tae better use. But it needs re-polished and what with the war there's not a stick o decent furniture to be got in the town. But the thought's been planted, and she rings for Minnie.

Minnie agrees it'd be a guid arrangement and is sure there's a chenille cloth in the linen cupboard that'd look just beautiful. As for her, well it'd be nothin tae her, runnin up and doon stairs.

Cissy – I mean Minnie – winks at me as she leaves the room.

*

The sun catches the rose window on the south façade o the Abbey. Further across the rooftops, Elliot Sands are white gold. The tide's in – shallow water like a mirror. A breeze rustles the leaves below the open window. Black clouds in the distance the only sign o the summer storm that kept me awake half the night.

I'm holding papa's hand tight against the wind and salt spray. A house is crumbling into the sea. Papa's directed to the boat builder's shed. He drags me after him. The smell of wood: the skeleton of a boat. A woman on a mattress, a blanket round her shoulders. A three-legged stool, kettle, round-bellied pot.

I stand, awkward.

A girl, my age, is whistling 'Soldiers of the Queen'. She sidles towards me, a toddler on her hip.

'What will you to do?' I say.

She glowers. 'What wuid ye think we'll "do"?'

'Sorry. I didn't mean... It was just, I saw your house...'

'Div I care?' She scuffs through sawdust, sticks her nose in the air. 'Bloody hoose stank o fish'. Her words, but, no mistaking it, the way I spoke.

I look down at my feet, hear a slap as the back of a hand hits her face. 'Less o the cheek, you. And damned lucky we were tae get that hoose. Dinnae you forget it.'

Papa's voice: 'Mr Greig, you can be sure members of the church will rally round.'

'Aye, weel. We're nae beggars. We'll salvage whit we can.'

'Didnae even hae linoleum on the flair,' she whispers as if it was a secret between us. 'I'm Cissy. Cissy Jean Greig.'

'My name's Marion,' I whisper back.

'I ken. I've seen ye at the kirk.'

A rush of blood. 'You go to Erskine?'

'Just started. We're nae lang here, just like you.'

I forget to keep my voice low. 'Do you like Arbroath?'

'Nae much. But I'm gaein tae the High School.'

'You're going there too?'

'It's nae just for the likes o you, ye ken.'

'Sorry, I didn't mean ...'

'What dae ye – bloody – mean then?'

I look down. 'Nothing, sorry.'

Her elbow digs into my side. 'Dinnae be daft.' She shifts her little brother to the other side. 'Hey! I could be your pal. I can speak lah-de-dah tae, ye ken. My Mam worked for the gentry.' The little finger of her free hand wiggles in my face. 'Would you like a cup of tea, my dear miss?'

I don't hear Minnie till she lays her hand on my shoulder.

'Wash your hair noo?'

'Thank you lass. But you've hurried your work surely.'

'No. I'll gae back doon later.'

'Your mother was a lucky woman.'

‘She didnae hae much o a life.’

‘But she’d you.’

She pokes the fire. ‘This shale is nae use ava. Ye cannae get decent coal thae days.’ The flames flicker blue and green.

As she straightens hersel, she presses her knuckles intae the small o her back and looks at me. ‘I dinnae suppose ye feel like writin the day? I could put a tray on your knee.’

I feel the spread of the nib on the down-stroke, the hesitation at the turn, the easy slide of the up. ‘I can hardly haud a pen, Minnie.’

‘But ye could try.’

‘What’s the point?’

‘I thocht, if ye were happy, ye’d want tae write.’

The veins on my hand stand high. My knuckles are swollen. ‘Minnie, I’m an auld wifie, frae another century.’

‘I’d like it, though. I’d feel – proud – if I could encourage ye.’

I shake my head. ‘That’s it. I’ve nothing mair tae say.’

‘Ye’re happy here, though... are you nae?’

‘You want a happy endin? You’re the ane writin the fairy tale.’

Disappointment in the squeeze o her fingers.

She lathers the soap and massages my scalp. ‘It’s still that thick,’ she says, ‘ye’ll nae gae bald onyway. Just a wee minute.’ A jug o water empties ower my heid. ‘That fine?’ She tests the feel o the hair. ‘Anither rinse,’ she says. ‘And that’s enough. Move a wee bittie ... grand.’ Glass on porcelain, water making music as it fills the jug. ‘Heid doon!’

I part the towel on my head. ‘I’ve been thinkin, though, Cissy – Minnie. My brother-in law has an old-fashioned sideboard thing – rosewood – belonged tae my

mother. When we sold the house – Ethel and me – we’d tae get rid o everything, all the furniture, except for that – you know what it’s like, the kind o thing you feel attached to. No reason. Anyway, Amy said she’d keep it for me. Walter’s probably never even noticed it since she died. It’ll be there still, in the back bedroom, my auld hat box inside.’

Framed forever inside the glass panelled door, a man with two ladies in crinoline dress and elaborate wigs, the younger in red and gold, poised to step over a stream. The older – in silver – fades into the background.

I trace the shapes of the women under the glass with my finger. ‘That’s Ethel and that’s Amy,’ I tell papa.

‘But where are you?’

I don’t know.

He ruffles my hair. ‘Dreaming, somewhere, I expect. And who’s the young man?’

‘A handsome prince.’

He laughs and says it’s a pity there aren’t two of them.

Mother says I’ve left fingerprints all over the glass.

‘There are some papers...’

‘Poetry?’

‘Well, maybe something. And family things, no much. Just a few photos, letters... they should be destroyed, really.’

‘I could get them for ye.’

‘Nae interest tae anybody but me. Maybe one poem. You might like tae see it.’

‘I’ll write tae yer brother-in law. Get them sent.’

‘I dinnae suppose you could ... what about the sideboard? Would ... would there be room for that?’

She's not sure. I shrug.

'I could ask.'

'I dinnae suppose you'd like a thing like that?' I pull the towel closer round my neck.

She mops up the drips. 'I'm no doin this for what I can get. I'll send for the papers anyway.' She wraps a towel round my head.

I hold her hand against my forehead. The pain's bad.

*

I haul myself to the mirror. The brush is still too heavy, but I can manage the comb. That same whorl on my hairline, the same eyebrows. In-valid, the face. Reflections in the wing mirrors disappear into infinity: Minnie, Marion. Daughter, sister. Friend, lover. I might have been a wife, but doubt I'd have made a good one. Poet. Not quite. Poetess. Once, I might have been someone worthwhile.

Cissy's voice in the corridor and a rap at the door. She's thinkin we've seen the back o the frost at last. 'My! Ye're up? Well done!'

'I'm grand, lass.'

'I picked ye some winter jasmine.'

'You're that guid to me, Cissy.' I hoist myself up.

'Ach ye'll be pickin yer ain in nae time. Guid as new ye'll be.'

She helps me up but I want to walk through by myself. 'I'll follow,' I tell her, and do. I catch her watching as I ease myself intae my chair.

'My, but ye are doin well.'

'I was thinkin, Cissy. Dae you ever wonder...'

'Aye. I do that. I wonder when you'll ever get my name richt!'

‘Oh, I’m sorry, lass.’

‘Tyach! Dinnae be daft. What is it?’

I’ve forgotten. ‘The days are gettin longer.’

She stirs the teapot, taps the spoon on the cup. ‘Aye,’ she says. ‘And noo,’ she points to an envelope propped on the tray. ‘Are ye nae wonderin what my letter is?’

‘I didnae notice it.’

‘A wee surprise. Hope ye dinnae mind. I didnae want tae tell ye till it was arranged.’

Blairgowrie

27th April 1946

Dear Miss Matthew,

Thank you so much for your kind words about my poetry and for your invitation to meet Miss Angus. I’m so glad to hear she’s recovering from the little stroke she had. I’d love to meet you both, and I’m quite able to travel, thank you, though, like Miss Angus, I’m not as sprightly as I once was.

I do remember your family. I knew your father well when I was a child. After the family left Dun I got news about him now and again – but nothing for a long time.

I very much look forward to meeting you both at Hayshead House at 2.00 o’clock on Thursday 9th June. I’m going to ask my driver to bring me via Lunan – a bit of a detour, I know, but Lunan Bay was a favourite haunt of mine when I was a child and I can’t resist the opportunity.

Yours sincerely

Violet Jacob (Mrs)

Chapter 13 – May, 1946

The clock chimes the hour. Minnie checks I'm tidy. 'She'll be here in a meenit.'

'The letter was friendly.'

'A wee bit raivelled though. She'll hae meant my Grandad.'

'Aye.' The doorbell rings. 'Crumbs on my chin?'

She shakes her head. 'I'll get the door.'

I make it to the top landing in time to see Minnie straightening her cuffs as she says how pleased she is.

'I trust Miss Angus is well?'

'Aye, thank you, kindly,' Minnie says, 'Recovered very well.' She looks up. Mrs Jacob's eyes follow. I risk a hand off the banister: wave. 'How do you do.'

'How do you do. Pleased to meet at last.'

'Marion doesnae manage the stairs very weel. You winnae mind gaein up?'

'Not at all. I'll take my time, that's the only thing. I walked further than I meant to at Lunan.'

'Oh, Lunan! I envy you that!' I call down. 'Such a special place.'

Half-way up the stairs she pauses, looks up to see how much further.

'Minnie, why do I no come down?' I call. 'I think it's too much for Mrs Jacob.'

Mrs Jacob leans against the banister. 'How silly of me to tire myself out before I got here.' Her face is drained o colour.

'Why don't I come down?'

'Oh my God, Marion. Just bide whaur ye are!' Minnie's holding her up.

'Just breathless. I'll be all right.'

'Ye need a doctor.'

Her head hangs forward.

'We'll get your driver back.' Minnie says. 'I could maybe catch him.' You can

come back anither day.'

She manages to rouse herself. 'Oh dear, no. Just a wet cloth, please, that's all I need. No fuss. And a minute's rest.' She wipes her brow wi the back of her hand and looks up at me. 'What d'you think, Miss Angus? This our last chance?'

'For goodness sake!'

'It's as far to go back as it is to climb up. I'm rather of a mind to carry on.'

I suggest we have tea on the landing. It'd be a shame tae waste Minnie's scones.

She's recovering. 'Splendid!' she says. 'But... I've a better idea. Don't suppose you keep whisky, by any chance, for emergencies? D'you know, I think a sip would do me – maybe all of us – the world of good.'

'That'd get our wee chat off to a grand start.'

'Better than any doctor.'

'I think your colour's comin back, right enough.' Minnie looks relieved.

'I'm coming up. Miss...'

'Marion. Call me Marion.'

*

We talk about the advantages and disadvantages of Kirriemuir and Arbroath, the war, the cost o living, rationing, everybody's business written down frae cradle tae grave. We thank God life's getting back tae normal, though God knows how long it'll take, and things'll never be the same again.

'I lost my son in the first war,' Mrs Jacob says. 'The Somme.'

'A terrible waste of lives.'

'I couldn't talk about it, for a long time. Writing was my way of coping.'

Minnie fills the gap. 'I like your poetry, even when it's sad.'

‘Thank you.’

She likes the subtlety of mine. ‘And you write in a very natural Scots voice,’ she says.

I tell her I can’t claim to be a native speaker, sometimes think there’s two different folk inside my skin.

‘It came naturally enough to me,’ she says. ‘I was educated at home, you see and my parents were often away – sometimes didn’t see them for months. Almost all the servants spoke Scots. And I played with the children in the cottar houses.’

Minnie would have said something then but Mrs Jacob – Violet – minds something that makes her laugh. We should have a little concert, the two of us, she says. Did I ever read that review? The one that said my poetry was like a melody of the fiddle, hers like the pianoforte?

I tell her I’m all out of tune.

She asks what I think of the new T.S. Eliot.

We agree, and disagree. Minnie wonders if the two of us, with so much in common, would like to chat alone and gets up to clear the plates.

‘Oh sit down, sit down! I do so want to talk to you.’ She relaxes back in her chair. ‘You getting in touch brought back such happy memories.’

My arm won’t move where it should. Minnie sees me struggle and sorts me, but I don’t want her to draw attention to me.

‘I knew your grandparents well,’ Mrs Jacob’s saying.

‘That’s what I thought you meant, in your letter – my grandad.’

‘He could turn his hand to anything, your grandad – especially anything to do with horses. He’d just to stand at the corner of the field and whistle and the horses would trot over to him. And your grandmother... I knew her better than my own mother. Just a week after I was born there was some problem with my nursemaid – I don’t know what it

was – a spectacular row with the housekeeper, I believe. Anyway, she walked out. But Wull had been born a few weeks before me, so your grandmother just moved Wull over and fed both of us. Thought nothing of it, apparently.’

‘Really?’ Minnie’s face a picture. ‘Well, I never kent that. I never even kent my gran, of course.’

‘A remarkable woman. Fine looking – handsome – and a nice way with her. Just as at home at the big house as she was in her cottage. Any visitors we had, she was called in for a bit of fortune telling in the evening. Quite a reputation she had, amongst the gentry.’

‘Fortune-tellin?’

‘She’d a glass ball. I think it was actually just a fisherman’s float, but she could see things in it.’

‘Well! I never did!’

‘And cards. She could read the cards. Just an ordinary pack. I don’t think your grandfather approved. She probably ... I don’t know for sure, but I believe people could be very generous.’

‘My mum never ever tellt me that.’

‘I always wanted to be one of the Greigs, when I was wee. I wanted to talk like them and play like them and eat with them and sleep in their cottage, all the children in the same bed.’

‘And did you ken my mum?’

‘Well, yes, I did.’ She looks a bit taken aback.

‘But you and Wull were friends,’ I say.

Her face opens up. ‘Wull! My hero! I followed him everywhere. Helped him bring in the poultry – that was one of his jobs – he knew where all the eggs were hidden. Could smell them out, I think. Once – I was maybe six or seven – I sneaked him into the

big house to try my rocking horse. He pretended he wasn't interested, but climbed on with me anyway. He made it go so fast we both fell off and I hurt my wrist. I think he got his behind leathered for that.'

'Hardly his fault.'

'No, it wasn't fair, but his father thought he should have known better.'

'You must have missed them – the Greigs – when they left.'

'I did – Wull especially.' She sets her cup down on the saucer.

'Ye're sure ye've had enough, now?' Minnie says.

'Thank you. That was very nice.' She turns to me. 'You'll remember what it was like at that time. The mills enticed so many folk off the land. There've been so many changes since we were young.'

I agree.

'You'd hardly believe what it was like, Minnie. And modern 'improvements'! Well, some good things have been swept aside with the bad.'

We wait for her to carry on.

'On a Saturday night, your Grandad always had the Bible and the Burns book out, The children read in turns. A great one for education, he was. I think that was why he went to Arbroath. He thought there'd be more chances for Cissy in the town.'

I ask if she'd ever seen any of them after they left Dun.

'Never. Isn't that strange? But I heard about them. Wull had friends amongst the staff. Now and again he got a bed in the stables – wasn't the only one, I'm sure. Even after I left home, I still occasionally got news. But I don't suppose Wull ever gave me another thought.' She turns back to Minnie. 'And are you musical, my dear? Wull was such a great fiddler, you know. I think he loved his fiddle more than anything.'

'Nae me. But I hae the fiddle.'

'So that's where it went!'

‘And she can sing,’ I say, ‘like Cissy.’

‘Yes, I remember Cissy could sing.’

‘Marion kent my mum.’

Mrs Jacob – Violet – looks at me sharply.

‘Cissy was at school with me,’ I explain.

There’s a pause. ‘Ah...’ She leans forward and pats Minnie’s hand. ‘I understand.

Sorry, I thought for a moment you meant your real mum.’

Minnie’s turn to look puzzled. ‘She was my real mum.’

‘But... oh, I didn’t realise. I assumed, you see, you were Wull’s child.’

I’m watching Minnie, and it’s the first time I’ve seen her out of her stride, but she gets over it quickly. Then it hits me.

‘No, he was my Uncle. My dad was killed in the war.’

Mrs Jacob – Violet – is sitting right back in her chair. ‘So Cissy...’

‘Cissy was my mum. She died wi the flu, in the epidemic, at the end o the war.’

‘You’re Cissy’s daughter?’

Minnie nods.

‘Well, whatever happened to Wull’s baby?’

Neither of them are paying me any attention.

‘I didnae ken he had a baby.’

‘Neither did he, that was the thing! It was after he went to South Africa.’

With my scrunched handkerchief I blot my face.

‘I didnae even ken he was in South Africa. I dinnae think my mum kent, but I suppose ... she could hae. She just didnae speak aboot him.’

‘The Boer War. That’s where he went, enlisted.’

My hands are shakin. ‘Oh dear God! That poor woman.’ They both look at me.

‘You all right, Marion?’ Minnie asks.

‘His wife, I mean.’

‘No, actually, it wasn’t his wife’s baby. He did have a wife once – according to their own customs, of course. But it wasn’t her baby.’

‘Look, I think ye’d better slow doon. Ye’ve fair lost me,’ Minnie says. ‘What dae ye mean, “their own customs”?’

‘Well, you know, Tinker custom.’

‘Tinker custom? My Dad hated Tinkers.’

‘Your gran was from a Tinker family.’

Minnie’s mouth open.

‘I’m so sorry, I assumed you’d know. Your gran was proud enough of it, even though she was settled.’

‘Well, Uncle Wull’s wife? Was she...?’

‘When the family moved to Arbroath, Wull went to live amongst his mother’s folk. And – well, just from what I’ve gathered – he was married young. Fifteen, maybe. But his wife’s family didn’t take to him. I don’t know how long the marriage lasted, and don’t think he’d any children – could be wrong about that though. Poor Wull didn’t seem to fit in anywhere, after he left Dun. I always just think of him and his fiddle.’

Minnie’s shakin her heid. ‘What about this baby, then? Whose baby was it, if it wasnae his wife’s?’

‘A little girl, it was, the baby. The mother was one of the chambermaids at Dun – a young lassie herself, from a nice family. As far as we know there was no understanding between them, it was just one of these... It must have happened that spring of the terrible snow. Remember that year, Marion? We heard afterwards Wull had appeared out of the blue, near frozen, more dead than alive. Didn’t even have his fiddle with him. They thought he’d lost it. The lass put him in the barn and looked after him till he recovered. Then he up and off.’

‘Dear God!’

‘He wouldn’t have left if he’d known. I’m sure he wouldn’t have done that.’

‘So what happened to the girl?’

‘The poor thing kept her secret as long as she could, just told a friend when the baby started to come. But it all went wrong – terribly wrong. The little girl was a tiny thing and the mother haemorrhaged, died before the doctor could get to her.’

Minnie’s fidgeting. ‘That’s a terrible story, but I still don’t understand. Why did you think I was that baby?’

‘Someone took her to Cissy – was she in Dundee? I seem to remember it was Dundee. Anyway, Cissy took the baby in.’

‘She must hae died. My mum never mentioned any bairn.’

The three of us look serious, nod.

‘But you didn’t find any papers? When your mum died?’

‘She’d nae papers. Said my Dad had lit the fire wi them, ae nicht he was drunk.’

‘I did hear he liked a drink,’ I say.

Minnie’s on her feet and at the window. ‘Well, the wee girl wasnae me. She must hae died. When was it, the Boer War? The 1890s? I wasnae even born then.’

‘Anglo-Boer War. 1900-1901. There were notices in all the papers at the time. Lord Lonsdale put together a force of 10,000 men. I don’t know what on earth put it into Wull’s head, but that’s what he did. Trained at Cupar, sailed to South Africa. Posted as “missing” soon after.’

‘I was born in December 1900.’

Everything inside me tangles up.

Mrs Jacob – I still can’t think o her as Violet – is still speakin. ‘Though who knows what happened to Wull? I can’t imagine him liking a soldier’s life. I’ve sometimes

thought he might have deserted, made a life for himself somewhere on the high veld. I've sometimes thought of him there, playing his fiddle.'

'He's nae daein that, oniewey. I hae it, under my bed. My mither aye kept it there, and I've just done the same.'

Chapter 14 – June, 1946

The sound of fingers flicking through pages. She's stopped reading.

'I've been thinkin about what Mrs Jacob said.'

It's an effort, tae open my eyes.

'She wasnae there. She maybe doesnae ken the richt wey o daen. Folk'll blame anybody ... specially if they're – well, ye ken. Different. Nae like ither folk.'

She moves across tae the fireplace, switches on the wireless. The music puts me in mind o a river.

'I cannae get used tae the idea my Mum wasnae really my Mum. My Dad now ... well, he never had that much tae say tae me. But Uncle Wull – my Dad? No, I cannae see it.'

I let mysel drift wi the current.

'It could explain some things though.'

For a few bars I cannae hear the music. Something's being pushed across the floor. I turn my head. Mama's sideboard, right beside my bed.

Minnie's face richt in front o mine. 'I brocht it ower sae ye can see whit I'm daein.' She's speaking slow. 'We should hae a lookie. Nae use it just sittin there.'

I'm lifted and propped wi pillows.

'Let's mak a start.' I think she's admiring the tapestry, but it's the hinge she's lookin at. She wedges a book under the door. 'There, that'll haud. And look here. Yer hat-box, just like ye said.'

J. Renard, 70, Rue de la Montagne, Bruxelles on the side. Monsieur Renard flirted wi me and wi Margaret. We laughed, afterwards.

'A wee bundle o books, and a parcel.' She gropes into the corners o the shelves.

'And that's it.'

Inside the hat box, table linen. Underneath that: notebooks, papers, a wee wooden box.

The linen's laid on the bed. 'Ye dinnae get stuff like this now.'

I push it ower tae her.

'I couldnae.' I gesture tae the fire.

'No, no. Looks like yer mither must hae done thae.'

I take her hand.

'Ye besom, ye! Well, thank ye. Thank ye kindly. I'll use them when I get my ain place.' She pecks my forehead.

I push against her lips.

From my notebooks, she reads pages at random. 'Is there somebody you'd like tae hae them?' she asks.

A pointin finger, I can manage.

'No.' She shunts them into a pile. 'Nae the fire. What a waste. What about the library? They'd like them.'

I was there, when it opened its doors.

The parade of dignitaries late, and there's a crush near the Courthouse.

Everyone's restless. I see Cissy pressing towards me but can't get away. My bodice feels too tight. 'Cissy!' I say. 'I didnae ken you'd be here.'

'Hae ye seen Robert?'

'No.'

She scans the crowd, moves on.

I manage to slip away by Springfield. From the top of the bank I can see the whole park. Robert stands out from everyone else. I make my way towards him.

He asks if I've seen Cissy.

'No,' I say.

That music's still playin when I come round.

Minnie's gaein through the papers. She hears me shift. 'Ye all richt?'

I smile.

'Gey lukewarm?'

I want to lie flat, gesture everythin should gae on the fire.

'Nae yet.' she says. 'I've sorted them. And I want tae show ye somethin.'

Mama's box. A picture o a forget-me-not, and the first verse I ever learned.

No earthy change will alter me,

Whate'er may be my lot

My heart will still be true to thee

Then oh, forget-me-not.

A dried flower in it... the smell of moorland.

'Ye sure ye're all right?'

I'm still smiling, but she looks worried. I force myself, manage to re-assure her.

'And I was lookin at yer certificates, when ye was sleepin, me nae haein any. I didnae ken ye'd a wee brither that died.'

My temperature's down, and the swelling on my tongue. My eyes don't hurt any more. I pick flakes of skin from my arm.

Everything's quiet. George must be better too.

A jolt. 'There's something wrong.' A voice like that never lies.

I slide out of bed. My legs wobble, but I hold onto the bannister. I follow muffled sounds down the stair. Outside the parlour door my body starts to shake. When I fall against the door, papa opens it.

His face is red against the white of George's shawl.

Mama's crying.

'Marion, come and pray with us,' papa says, 'for baby George. God bless his soul.'

Mama turns away from me.

It try to tell her papa said it wasn't my fault, nor Cissy's, though she got the fever first.

She doesn't understand, holds up the parcel. 'And this is addressed tae Mrs Service. Never even been opened.' She's readin the date-mark. '1936. Whit wey would yer sister nae hae opened it?'

I never opened it either.

'Nae often ye see wax seals nowadays.' She looks at me, miming the tearin o paper.

Swallows swoop by the window. They'll be gatherin soon. On the wireless, the river twists and turns.

A knife slid under the wax, she takes the string off, rolls it up, unwraps the parcel, folds the paper. 'That'll come in handy. Ye cannae get haud o nothin thae days.' A piece o paper in her hand: 'Now. Here's a wee note. It's got a stamp – an official stamp – Garnavel Hospital. "The enclosed were left behind when you collected your sister's effects."'

She inspects the embroidered squares. ‘Look at this ane. Look at it.’ She hauds them in front o me, one after the ither, for me tae admire, lays them on the pillow, beside my head. ‘Exquisite!’ she says. ‘Never seen flowers like thae.’

An English adjective tae dae them justice. It was Ethel’s eyesight gied oot, in the end.

‘Now, whit’ll we dae wi them?’

A kaleidoscope o memories is spinning in my heid. My hand flutters on the quilt.

‘I’m nae takin them for masel, if that’s whit ye mean. What about the kirk?’ She sets a square against the wall. ‘Tae raise funds! There’s that many widows thae days, and the sodgers that cannae get jobs ... the Guild’s aye lookin tae raise money. There’s what ... twenty squares here?’

The chaos o colours fades tae grey. I cannae see a thing nae mair.

‘If they was framed and raffled – think how much that’d bring in!’ She must be siftin through the pile. ‘A shame tae split them up though.’

Her weight maks the springs o the bed jangle. I feel her breith on my face.

‘Ye need tae sleep again?’

The current taks me. Moonlicht, scattered blossom – like seed pearls – floats on the surface o the water.

Naebody, but naebody, can haud me back now.

*

A flat plonk, plunk, plonk, plunk in my ear drowns oot the music. I choke and splutter.

‘Sorry. Did I waken ye?’ She sorts my covers. ‘There, that better, lovie? A wee nap, was it, ye needed?’

All I want is tae gae back.

‘I found yer poem!’

Her voice too loud.

‘I didnae like tae gae through the rest o yer things till ye wakened.’

Too loud by far: my breath catches in my chest.

‘But hae a look at this, Marion. Look whit I found. And if it hadnae been for you and that sideboard, I’d never hae thocht tae rake in Uncle Wull’s fiddle case.’

The river’s turbulent: swirls and eddies. Waves of sound crash around me.

‘It wasnae South Africa. It was Canada. I found this letter thing... a kind o voucher, or ticket, for a shippin company. Allan Bros. (Liverpool and London).’

The noise abates. The melody’s taen up by the violin.

My mouth’s parched. There’s a glass of water beside me, but I can’t reach.

‘Ye’re nae sae good the day, are ye?’ Her finger moistens my lips.

Everything’s fading intae the distance now, even her voice.

‘But it was Canada, Marion. A sailin tae Canada. February 1900. And there must hae been an understandin. Twa berths, he had.’

I can’t grasp it but feel something rest on my palm.

‘And look at this, a shard o china.’

I swear it, by my deed.

‘That must hae meant something tae him.’

I shiver.

Ye all richt, lovie? Ye all right?’

I know she’s standing over me.

‘What is it.’

‘Elliot,’ I manage.

She lifts the piece of china from my hand. ‘Frae Elliot Sands? Ye could be richt there. Well! Would ye nae just wonder what the story was?’