

Folklore and the Fantastic in
Twenty-First-Century Fiction
and
Depths, a novel

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Creative and Critical Writing

School of Literature, Drama, and Creative Writing
University of East Anglia

September 2016

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Abstract

This thesis is, and is about, fiction which reworks folkloric narrative using aesthetics and ethics which react against postmodernism. Part one is a critical essay in which I define a group of such novels written in the early twenty-first-century as ‘folklore-inflected’, and examine how they set themselves apart from the postmodernist fairy tale fictions which came before them. Focusing on *A Summer of Drowning* by John Burnside, Eowyn Ivey’s *The Snow Child*, and Patrick Ness’s *The Crane Wife*, I show how they turn from irony to sincerity, from magic to the Todorovian fantastic, and from overt political engagement to a quieter ethics linked to the sublime and the sacred.

Part two comprises a novel, *Depths*, which enacts and develops many of the paradigms described in part one, for example by eschewing postmodern irony in the narrative style and focusing on characters’ various attempts at authenticity. It retells the Celtic legend of the kelpie, a shape-shifting water horse which tempts people into drowning, in present-day Scotland; at the same time it is a story of a disappearance (of Iain – friend, brother, and almost-lover to the protagonists) and an appearance (of Mary, who cannot remember who she is), and their consequences for the three people they affect most closely. Following Donall, Dia, and Fay as their lives are infiltrated and their desires twisted by Mary’s influence, the novel maintains a fantastic hesitation around the character of Mary, whose increasing manipulation may, or may not, have its roots in folklore.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Trezza Azzopardi and Dr Stephen Benson, for their constant support and guidance, and Sara Taylor, for always reading, advising, and encouraging. Thanks also to Amanda Dillon, Ben Wise, and Jack Ramm, who read drafts, and to everyone who read chapters, especially Rob Ward and Kim Lockwood.

Part I

Folklore and the Fantastic in Twenty-First-Century Fiction

Introduction

Once upon a time, again

Postmodernism in its various iterations – its ‘fragments, hybridity, relativism, play, parody, pastiche, [its] ironic, sophisticated stance’ (Hassan 16) – has been dying, if not dead, for decades. Josh Toth claims that ‘[t]he deathwatch began [...] as early as the mid-1980s’ (2), and Linda Hutcheon famously sounded the final death-knell in 2002. Since then, attempts have been made to name the literature of the twenty-first-century in terms of its postmodernist heritage. Terms from ‘post-postmodernism’ (Nicoline Timmer) to ‘late postmodernism’ (Jeremy Green) describe contemporary literature as working with, rather than against, postmodernism’s legacy. At the same time, there are those who claim that ‘things really have changed in the twenty-first century’ (Adiseshiah and Hildyard 2). For them, the continued focus on contemporary fiction’s postmodernist heritage ‘unhelpfully obscures influences, challenges, and precursors that are at least as important for current literary practices’ (Vermeulen 14).¹ Different strands of fiction today are either rejecting the inheritance left to it by postmodernism, or accepting it and seeking to develop aspects of postmodernism further.

At least one strand of literature is doing both. The fairy tale is being reassessed by contemporary novelists who, while rejecting postmodernist strategies, have accepted the postmodernist heritage of the fairy tale form. Fairy tales were rewritten by postmodernist writers in ‘abundance’ (Bacchilega, *Postmodern* 2) to the point that these writers became ‘the fairy tale generation’ (Benson, ‘Fiction’ 2). From Robert Coover’s *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969), through Angela Carter’s iconic *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and Margaret Atwood’s *Bluebeard’s Egg* (1983), to Sara Maitland’s ‘Wicked Stepmother’s Lament’ (1996), ‘fairy tales in the second half of the twentieth century [...] enjoyed an

¹ Vermeulen is writing here of the influence of ‘a modernist impulse’ (14) on contemporary fiction, and the need for current criticism to rebalance itself away from the influence of postmodernism; Adiseshiah and Hildyard, too, see modernism as an influence. This is also attested to in the many new ‘isms’ being put forward to describe various facets of contemporary literature and culture, many of which take modernism as their base, among them Alan Kirby’s digimodernism, Nicholas Bourriaud’s altermodernism, Gilles Lipovetsky’s hypermodernism, and Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker’s metamodernism.

explosive popularity' (Bacchilega, *Postmodern* 2). Work by these writers, as well as by Salman Rushdie, A S Byatt, and others, is postmodernist in its desire simultaneously to inhabit and to critique old forms; Carter famously claimed that 'I am all for putting new wine into old bottles, especially if it makes the old bottles explode' ('Notes' 37). For Bacchilega, these 'postmodern transformations do not exploit the fairy tale's magic simply to make the spell work, but rather to unmake some of its workings' (*Postmodern* 23). For a new generation of critics and scholars today, however, these new and exciting revisions have, partly through the simple process of time passing, become accepted and expected. '[A]s a cluster of ideas and assumptions, postmodern thinking and writing functions as a "background" or cultural setting' to contemporary writers' work (Timmer 13); even for those who are attempting to reject some of postmodernism's claims or aesthetics, 'postmodernism always remains present as a premise and a background against which [contemporary] novels position their attempts to move beyond it' (Huber 216). As far as fairy tales are concerned, even '[c]hildren in the early decades of the twenty-first century may very well be exposed to *Shrek* films, DreamWorks' parodies of Disney, before viewing what baby boomers would consider fairy-tale "classics"' (Bacchilega, *Fairy Tales* 12). Because of this, twenty-first-century retellers of fairy tales such as John Burnside, Patrick Ness, and Eowyn Ivey are writing from a particular position between past inheritance and present concerns: not only do they use fairy-tale and folkloric narrative in ways which show that they have learned the lessons of postmodernism and are therefore, in the most literal sense, post-postmodernists – the descendants of the fairy-tale generation – but the texts they produce are also firmly of the twenty-first-century, and exhibit the aesthetics and preoccupations which critics are beginning to delineate as particular to now.

This is perhaps no surprise. Fairy tales and folkloric narratives are by nature *retold*; more than other narrative forms, each version of a tale is both contemporary and historical. 'The fairy tale is unique in [...] being both genuinely embedded in modern popular culture and related, albeit distantly, to premodern cultures of storytelling' (Benson, 'Fiction' 4); every version is both 'of now' and in direct dialogue with other times and places. Each retelling contains 'layered critical contestations of earlier

invocations' (Makinen 161) and so looks backwards to engage with previous iterations of its tale. At the same time, retellings always tell a story of the specific time of their production. From the luxuriances of the salons of Madame d'Aulnoy to the nationalising aims of Calvino, from the bowdlerizing of the Grimms to the sexuality and violence of Carter, the 'permutations' of folkloric narratives 'have depended and will continue to depend on human desires, desires which are shaped by varying histories, ideologies, and material conditions' (Bacchilega, *Postmodern* 146). Features are removed or elided, elements are added or amplified which respond to current concerns, and this makes these texts a particularly apposite tool with which to study the contemporary. What Stephen Benson wrote of postmodernist rewritings can be seen as true of works from other times as well: their 'contemporaneity [...] can be said to reside in their use and abuse of the fairy tale' ('Fiction' 3). The tale I will tell of the uses and abuses of folkloric narrative in the Anglo-American fiction of the twenty-first century is firmly contemporary, but it is also haunted by the work of the postmodernist writers who came before it.² If 'the death of postmodernism (like all deaths) can be viewed as a passing, a giving over of a certain inheritance' (Toth 2), then part of the inheritance passed on to recent fiction is an engagement with fairy and folk tales, an engagement which is marked by a shift away from the preoccupations and aesthetics which marked much postmodernist fairy-tale fiction and into those which are beginning to be seen as characterising twenty-first-century fiction.

Generational changes

Part of the inheritance of postmodernist fairy-tale fiction is a sense that perhaps the fairy tale, like postmodernism, is dying. For Bacchilega, the ubiquity of parodies like *Shrek* 'raises the question of whether the magic of fairy tales is over' (*Fairy Tales* 12).³ Benson, too, asks, '[w]hat if instead of acceding to the maintenance of generic momentum, we

² I have restricted my study to the Anglophone fiction of the UK and North America because it is primarily here that postmodernist fairy tale fictions came to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, and it seems fitting to trace the descendents of these fictions in the same area.

³ She goes on to make the case for a continued engagement with a particular kind of wonder in fairy tale transformations, but her inclusion of the possibility of the end of the fairy tale is itself telling.

were to entertain the possibility of the fairy-tale tradition as nearing its end? [...] What sort of fairy-tale fiction would result from a sense of the fairy tale itself as ending, or as nearing its end?' ('Late' 124). One answer to this question is: a kind of fairy-tale fiction which is moving beyond what has been thought of as the fairy tale itself. While the European fairy tales popularised by Perrault and the Grimms provided the majority of the intertexts for the fairy-tale generation, many twenty-first-century novels draw their intertexts from a broader group of tales. Rather than fairy or folk tales, many work with related folkloric forms. John Burnside's novel *A Summer of Drowning* (2011) retells the Norwegian legend of the huldre; Amy Sackville's *Orkney* (2013) and Margo Lanagan's *The Brides of Rollrock Island* (2012) both rewrite legends about selkies; and Susan Fletcher's fishman in *The Silver Dark Sea* (2012) is also a creature of legend. This is not to claim that all contemporary novels eschew fairy and folk tales. Eowyn Ivey's *The Snow Child* (2012) is based on the Russian folktale 'Snegurochka', mediated through Arthur Ransome's English translation, 'The Little Daughter of the Snow'. In his novel *The Crane Wife* (2013), Patrick Ness fuses the two forms together, mixing Japanese folktale Tsuru no Ongaeshi with a volcanic legend to create a new tale which he both tells, in a faux-traditional style, and retells, in the novel's main London-based plot. Helen Oyeyemi and Jess Richards also draw upon and mingle a host of folkloric narratives of various forms as well as folkloric motifs in order to create new stories which glance at rather than retell older tales.⁴ All of these writers pick and choose motifs, characters, and tales, mixing them not only with each other but with conventions from the European novel and its various genres. As Bacchilega has said, 'the authority of the canonized Perrault-Grimms-Disney triad is still at stake in the re-creation of fairy tales,

⁴ There are also a large number of contemporary novels based on myths, from various traditions, including Norse (A S Byatt's *Ragnarok* (2011), Klas Östergren's *The Hurricane Party* (2007), Joanna Harris's *The Gospel of Loki* (2014)) and Celtic (Lisa Tuttle's novels). The Greek myths are particularly popular – Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) are just two examples – and there are numerous retellings of Christian myths and Biblical narrative. These are often, like Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010), Naomi Alderman's *The Liar's Gospel* (2012), and Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary* (2012), from a demythologising perspective. While these are fruitful texts to study in a twenty-first-century context, texts reworking mythologies, with their links to religious belief and practice, do not descend as directly from fairy-tale fiction as those which work with folktale and legend, and I will not be working with them here.

but it is no longer *the* central pretext for their adaptations in literature, film, or other media' (*Fairy Tales* 27). While an interest in reworking folkloric narrative remains strong, contemporary fairy-tale fiction has broadened its horizons; the descendants of the fairy-tale generation have travelled away from their birthplace in the European fairy tale to set up home in various other, related forms. These contemporary novelists are writing what I will call 'folklore-inflected' fiction. This fiction is interested in the narratives, motifs, and concerns of folkloric stories, but may not be wedded to retelling a single tale or tale-type in the same way as much postmodernist fairy-tale fiction has been. They also differ from their postmodernist forebears in other, related ways, which I will explore: in their relationship with the magic of the folklore they invoke; in their levels of political engagement; and in their turn away from irony.

Almost all postmodernist fairy-tale retellings contain significant elements of magic, to the point that many of them, by Salman Rushdie and Angela Carter in particular but also by Robert Coover, Sarah Maitland, and Margaret Atwood, 'have been classified as magic realist narratives' (K. Smith 52). I take this much-debated term in its simplest, formal meaning, as described by Amaryll Chanady: '[i]n magical realism, the supernatural is not presented as problematic' (Chanady 23).⁵ She defines this against the fantastic, in which there is a lasting uncertainty as to the nature of the events in the text – what Todorov called a hesitation between magic and rationalism. Critics like Wendy B. Faris would incorporate such hesitation into magical realism, creating a more inclusive definition for it – one in which the magic 'does not brutally shock but neither does it melt away' (Faris 8), and which 'takes account of [the] strange combination of acceptance and scepticism that characterises the reader's experience in magical realism' (Faris 20). However, the distinction between the fantastic and magical realism, or what Todorov would in a more formalist way call the marvellous, is important, because it

⁵ Many critics, notably Theo D'Haen, would argue that magical realism is a non-Western form or genre and cannot be expressed in post-Enlightenment Western literature – D'Haen, in fact, sees the Western expression of a magical realist impulse as more properly belonging to the fantastic. There are others, such as Wendy B. Faris who I mention below, who would expand their definition of magical realism to include not only texts produced in Europe and North America, but those which create a fantastic hesitation as well. For reasons of brevity I cannot explore these debates further; I mention magical realism only to move away from it and the postmodernist fairy tale fictions with which it is often associated.

provides one of the points of divergence between postmodernist fairy-tale fiction and contemporary folklore-inflected fiction. In the former, supernatural events such as Saleem's extraordinary sense of smell in *Midnight's Children* and the many marvels in Angela Carter's work are presented as simply part of the world of the text; here, 'supernatural events provoke no particular reaction either in the characters or the implicit reader' (Todorov 54). In contrast, uncertainty over the ontological status of characters described as potentially folkloric in twenty-first-century texts such as Eowyn Ivey's *The Snow Child* and Patrick Ness's *The Crane Wife* provides the main thrust of the central plot. In these novels, as I will demonstrate in chapter one below, the folkloric magic is problematised, and the text can be seen to remain hesitant about its status.

Along with this hesitancy about magic, recent folklore-inflected fiction turns away from the fairy-tale generation in quietening its political stance. Many postmodernist writers wrote works which, while celebrating the magic of fairy tales, disenchanted and deconstructed the extant narratives of race, gender, class, and nationality which they saw in the world around them and often in the tales themselves. While this is not a necessary condition of postmodern fairy tales – they can be 'both affirmative and questioning, without necessarily being recuperative or politically subversive' (Bacchilega, *Postmodern* 22) – it is a ubiquitous one. Andrew Teverson, writing about Salman Rushdie, has said that: 'Rushdie, like many authors in a generation profoundly influenced by the work of Roland Barthes, reutilizes fairy tales in order to contest the models of social and cultural identity that such narratives have, in their canonical forms, reinforced' (Teverson 48).⁶ In a similar vein, Sharon R. Wilson describes Margaret Atwood's specific aims and strategies:

As a postmodern writer, Atwood revises her works' fairy-tale intertexts by using techniques such as building scenes on fairy-tale images, moving females from object to subject, displacing the truth of traditional narratives, making marginalized subtexts central, and reversing intertexts' norms or ideologies. (Wilson 115)

The majority of these characteristics are based in subversion and emancipatory politics,

⁶ I take his term 'canonical' to mean those versions of tales which are most commonly known and referenced, largely from 'the canonized Perrault-Grimms-Disney triad' to which Bacchilega refers (*Fairy Tales* 27).

and Wilson links these attributes directly to the postmodernism of Atwood's work. Alongside Rushdie and their other contemporaries Atwood is what Angela Carter famously described as 'in the demythologizing business' ('Notes' 38). This has been seen as important work, ideologically, but a generation later this approach has lost some of its potency. In twenty-first-century folklore-inflected fiction this demythologizing is a much less pervasive presence, and works by Burnside, Ivey, Ness, and Amy Sackville all eschew explicitly demythologizing tactics. As 'political agendas seem to have largely receded into the background', though, many critics have warned that there is now a risk of texts becoming 'tacitly or knowingly complicit' with the structures of power that much postmodernist fiction saw as its duty to deconstruct (Huber 253). While I believe these fears to be largely unfounded, their expression marks a shift in emphasis from socio-political engagement to what I will call a quieter political stance. This quietening is a reorientation which pulls political concerns away from the foreground of the narrative, and I will examine it in detail in chapter two.

These changes – from fairy tale to folklore, from the marvellous to the fantastic, and from demythologizing to a lessened, or quieter, political engagement – do not involve the same level of critique as many postmodernist works. The novels which contain them have not set themselves up against existing narratives in a stance of rebellion, as many postmodernist fictions were seen to do; they are not shocking or outrageous. Instead, they seem to be written by what David Foster Wallace famously called:

some weird bunch of anti-rebels [...]. Who treat old untrendy human troubles in US life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. (Wallace 192-3)

Outdated or anachronistic as it may seem, sincerity and authenticity are firmly established as traits of contemporary literature; these ideas inform the work of Ihab Hassan, Wolfgang Funk, Irmtraud Huber, and others. David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris describe a rise in 'the importance of sincerity and authenticity over postmodern irony, of faith and spirituality over postmodern scepticism' (xxiii) as a key shift in orientation for recent critics. Huber describes an 'authenticity and sincerity' which 'is

predicated on its own individual contingency' (27) as being an important aspect of contemporary literature. Clearly:

[s]uch a replacement of capitalised Truth with individualised authenticity is quite paradoxically in keeping with postmodernism's agenda of fragmentation [...]. At the same time, the attempt is to recover a confidence in the ultimate possibility of meaningful inter-subjective communication based on a notion of referentiality that has been ostracised by postmodernist thought. (Huber 27-8)

This, then, is a sincerity which has taken account of the concerns pointed out by postmodernism and is now making 'a decisive move beyond postmodernist disillusion' (Huber 28); it is a sincerity aware of its own susceptibility to irony and ridicule, and aware of the possibility that it could be read in more than one way. Wallace claimed that rather than run the risk of being too shocking, '[t]he new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes [...]. To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity' (192-3). This risk is staged in relation to folklore and art in several contemporary folklore-inflected novels. In *A Summer of Drowning*, the narrator, Liv, knows that 'the people in town will say I am just as crazy as that old man who lost his mind' and started telling folkloric tales as if they were true (Burnside, *Summer* 7). She runs the risk of 'accusations of melodrama' because she believes in the folklore; one of *The Crane Wife's* protagonists, George, runs the same risk when asked to respond to the stranger Kumiko's artwork: "They're..." Her face [...] was so beautiful and kind and somehow looking right back at George that to hell with it, in he went, "They're like looking at a piece of my soul" (Ness 72). George cannot simply be sincere in his appreciation of her work. Because he knows she might laugh at him, he has to pause, to gather himself before he takes that risk – but, like Liv in *A Summer of Drowning*, he does it anyway. The novels run the same risks as their characters, by daring to stage questions of sincerity, and literary critics, too, show themselves aware of scepticism as a possible response to their arguments claiming sincerity and authenticity as key facets of twenty-first-century writing. While Nicoline Timmer sees in contemporary literature a desire for 'something "more real" (dare we say "authentic"?)' (328), she has to doubly bracket off this desire, first in quotation marks and then in parentheses; Huber makes a similar gesture when she describes 'a return to some sort of "real"' (28). Literature and its

criticism are both turning towards sincerity and authenticity, but they are doing so in a way which has taken account of the scepticism of postmodernism and attempts not to ignore it but to move through it; to move past it, but not to pass it by.

I set out these distinctions in the use of the supernatural, in political engagement, and in sincerity not in order to claim that twenty-first-century folklore-inflected fiction has made a complete and decisive break with postmodernist fairy-tale fiction. Instead, I would describe this current thread of fiction engaged with folklore as rising in prominence while another subsides, in a way akin to Jameson's description of periodization. He writes that:

[r]adical breaks between periods do not generally involve complete changes of content but rather the restructuring of a certain number of elements already given: features that in an earlier period or system were subordinate now become dominant, and features that had been dominant now become secondary. (Jameson 123)

Formerly dominant features like a marvellous use of magic in folkloric narrative, an ironic stance, and a demythologizing aim have not disappeared. Several writers of the fairy-tale generation are still producing work which, like Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Robert Coover's *Stepmother* (2004), continues all three of these attributes, and other writers are following in their footsteps. This is particularly true of Carter's demythologizing project: Jeanette Winterson creates narratives which show the stories people believe in to be bogus; Susan Fletcher's *The Silver Dark Sea* and Elisabeth Gifford's *Secrets of the Sea House* (2013) also, in different ways, disenchant the folklore they invoke. Rather than simply following these more closely-related descendents of postmodernist fairy tale rewriters into the new millennium, however, I will explore the fairy-tale generation's more rebellious (or anti-rebellious) inheritors. Like children rebelling against their parents, they exhibit the characteristics of their own generation, but in ways which are directly informed by the family to which they belong. In this way, rather than a complete break from postmodernism, the folklore-inflected fictions of the twenty-first century 'can be more easily understood as both continuous and discontinuous with their predecessors' (Toth 17). In studying these fictions, I am examining not only an important strand of twenty-first-century literature, but an as yet

relatively understudied aspect of the legacy of postmodernism.

Chapter 1

The fantastic hesitation: ‘like a mirage, close and distant, real and unreal’

Todorov in the twenty-first century

Folklore-inflected fictions published in the last few years have not yet received much academic response, but the existing criticism of them in reviews is already pointing to the dual nature of many of these novels.⁷ Describing Patrick Ness’s novel, one reviewer writes that ‘[w]hile *The Crane Wife* never dives headlong into the supernatural, there is a spell that Ness is casting here’ (M. Jackson). Such hesitation about the book’s magic is also found in reviews of *A Summer of Drowning*, which is described as ‘haunted by the border between what we know and what we dream of; ‘[t]here are moments when Burnside pulls us into territory that hovers dangerously near the supernatural, but he does it so adeptly that we can only gasp at the vision before us, and then watch it recede’ (Patterson). In *The Snow Child*, too, reviewers have seen a duality: ‘Eowyn Ivey keeps a delicate balance between fantasy and realism’ (Feay); her work is ‘magical yet brutally realistic’ (Holt), and ‘[t]he final truth [...] stays a mystery’ (Tucker). What these reviewers point to as a ‘balance’ between magic and realism can be best understood as a fantastic hesitation in the Todorovian sense.

It is worth developing the definition of the fantastic further in order to examine how it functions in more detail, and to expand on its relationship to different forms of folklore. For Chanady, fantastic texts are those in which ‘two distinct levels of reality are represented. One is our everyday world, ruled by laws of reason and convention, and the other is the supernatural, or that which is inexplicable according to our logic’ (5). While ‘our logic’ may, depending on the individual or culture encompassed by ‘our’, include elements of the supernatural, in the folklore-inflected novels of the twenty-first-century there is a clear division set up between rationalism on the one side and magic on the

⁷ John Burnside’s work is the exception to this, and I will engage with some of the criticism of his novels later on. Cristina Bacchilega has pointed out a need for more extensive work to be done on *The Snow Child* (*Fairy Tales* 196), and this call is beginning to be answered by, for example, Carina Hart. At the time of writing only my own work has touched on *The Crane Wife*.

other. It was Todorov who most fully defined and examined this kind of division; in his formulation the fantastic was set between the adjacent genres, as he called them, of rationalism and magic. These he called the marvellous, where magic is an accepted part of the text's created world, and the uncanny, where the text's world runs on the principles of rationalism, and where any apparently supernatural event could be explained as the result of a dream, hallucination, or trick.⁸ He characterised the fantastic as a hesitation between the marvellous and the uncanny, a lasting uncertainty as to the nature of the events in the text:

[t]he fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous [*sic*]. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event. (Todorov 25)

Todorov saw the fantastic as a borderline dividing these ‘neighbouring genres’, represented by the following diagram:

uncanny | fantastic-uncanny | fantastic-marvelous | marvelous (44)

Here, the fantastic is represented only by the line between the fantastic-uncanny and the fantastic-marvellous, but Neil Cornwell expands Todorov's diagram into a larger and more illuminating spectrum:

non-fiction	realism	uncanny realism	fantastic uncanny	pure fantastic	fantastic marvellous	marvellous	mythology
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(39)

This sliding scale across which tale tellers and retellers can move seems the most appropriate way of thinking about the folklore-inflected fiction of the twenty-first century, as the use of magic in a folklore-inflected text depends in part on the type of folklore with which it chooses to engage. As Todorov has pointed out, '[w]e generally link the genre of the marvellous to that of the fairy tale' (54). As 'the "classic" fairy tale is a *literary* appropriation of the older folk tale' (Bacchilega, *Postmodern* 3, original emphasis), the folk and fairy tale share many formal features, including their attitude to magic. Max Lüthi described the folk tale as being set in a one-dimensional world in which things and people are represented without depth and described in an abstract

⁸ Critics have long debated whether the fantastic is a genre (as Todorov describes it) or a mode (the term first put forward by Rosemary Jackson, and since taken on by many others). I will follow critical consensus in referring to it as a mode.

style; crucially, this is also a world in which ‘the numinous’ – the supernatural – ‘excites neither fear nor curiosity’ (Lüthi 7). By contrast, in legends, ‘side by side with the world of the everyday reality there exists an “other” world whose spirit is clearly distinct’ (Lüthi 4). Jason Marc Harris makes a similar distinction:

[t]he *fairy tale* (*märchen*), *wonder tale*, or one of the “Tales of Magic” (according to Stith Thompson’s terminology) [...] tends towards fantasy. The fairy tale is a sustained presentation of this secondary world; a reader, once immersed in this medium, ‘experiences no more fantastic reversals.’ The *folk legend* (*sage*) is closer to the fantastic, since the everyday world clashes with the numinous one. (22, original emphasis)

In reworking specific forms of folklore into novels, writers have different relationships with the supernatural to negotiate: the fairy tales reworked by postmodernist writers developed into marvellous literary fiction, and as contemporary writers move away from the fairy tale into forms like the legend, they are also eschewing the marvellous in favour of the fantastic. Of course, not all recent retellings are of legends, and therefore not all folklore-inflected novels fall into the category of the ‘pure fantastic’, or sit on Todorov’s borderline; some lie closely on either side of it. Sackville’s *Orkney* and Cecilia Ekbäck’s *Wolf Winter* (2014) both maintain the undecideability of the fantastic hesitation until the denouement, when *Wolf Winter*, based on a folk tale, moves into the marvellous and *Orkney*, based on a mixture of legends, retreats to the uncanny; even novels more securely situated at each end of the spectrum, like Susan Fletcher’s fully demythologizing *Silver Dark Sea* and Lisa Tuttle’s marvellous-fantasy novel *The Mysteries* (2005), rely on the fantastic hesitation for narrative tension.

Beyond this, though, are novels like Burnside’s *A Summer of Drowning* and Ivey’s *The Snow Child*, which never confirm whether the events they describe belong in the rational or the magical world. Even if these instances of a ‘pure fantastic’ are few, contemporary folklore-inflected fiction can be seen to have moved along the sliding scale set out by Cornwell away from the marvellous favoured by many postmodernists and towards, and in many cases into, the fantastic. This is not a local trend within fiction working with folklore; it is part of a return to realism or neo-realism, or what Eaglestone has called ‘a whole cultural turn towards the idea of reality’ (18). Robert Rebein uses the term ‘dirty realism’. For him:

contemporary realist writers have absorbed postmodernism's most lasting contributions and gone on to forge a new realism that is more or less traditional in its handling of character, reportorial in its depiction of milieu and time, but is at the same time self-conscious about language and the limits of mimesis. (Rebein 20)

Josh Toth sees emerging alongside this neo-realism something quite different: 'rather than just new "realisms", then, what we see [...] are narrative forms that renew the realist faith in mimesis while simultaneously deferring and frustrating that faith via the irony and stylistics of a now past, or passed, postmodernism' (132-3). Whether the texture of that writing is 'more or less traditional' or makes use of the 'irony and stylistics' of postmodernism, it is clear that a reassessment of the role realism has to play in contemporary literary practice is under way. Although the use of the folkloric supernatural in contemporary folklore-inflected fiction does not allow it to be described fully as realism or mimesis, a move away from the marvellous of postmodernist fairy-tale retellings and *towards* realism along Cornwell's spectrum would leave it in the realm of the fantastic. It may seem anachronistic to ally texts which are overtly concerned with magic and folklore with a turn to realism, but, as Adiseshiah and Hildyard point out, the 'complication and problematisation of realism is most obviously apparent in the presence of the unseen that haunts many of the novels' of the twenty-first century (2). It makes sense, too, for a larger shift to be felt in smaller groups of texts: for Hassan, 'literary realism, though it may not suffice, remains indispensable; its discontents spill into, indeed inform, other genres' (24). By moving towards realism and into the fantastic, contemporary writers working with folklore show in their different ways how the inheritance of postmodernism can meet the concerns of the twenty-first century. In order to explore the specific ways in which this contemporary fantastic can be created I will focus on Burnside's *A Summer of Drowning* and Ivey's *The Snow Child*. Even though the two novelists work with different folkloric intertexts, they both create 'pure' or borderline fantastic hesitations by offering both a realist and a supernatural reading of the worlds in which they set their stories.

Fantastic settings

The world each writer creates is based firmly in a precise location – the Norwegian

island of Kvaløya in *A Summer of Drowning*, and the frontier territory of 1920s Alaska in *The Snow Child* – and are described in realist terms. When Burnside's narrator describes a journey across her island, she says:

We went out to the end of the earth today. It isn't far, just a short drive to the far side of Kvaløya, then over the bridge and the causeway, out to the furthest point on Hillesøy, where we always find *kråkebolle*, half-smashed on the rocks, powder green and white, or touched with pale blush pink. (*Summer* 240-1, original emphasis)

This visual, colourful description of local wildlife is touristic: the italicised Norwegian word for sea urchin, *kråkebolle*, and the directions given in the preceding lines imply a reader who knows neither the language nor how to move through the landscape. While this is in fact how one would travel from Kvaløya to Hillesøy, it is the description's realism, not its reality, which is important. The initial whimsy of calling the place 'the end of the earth' is punctured by the mundane directions. The visual details are also in keeping with realist description, and are something Ivey makes use of in *The Snow Child*, too, although Ivey's realism is not in the same touristic vein. Mabel documents the local plant life in quasi-scientific terms in the letters she sends back to her family, describing 'wild roses, simple with five pink petals and prickly stems; geraniums, their thin petals lavender with deeper purple veins' (Ivey 366) and many more. These letters, as well as the drawings Mabel includes, are considered to be 'the frontier equivalent of an Italian master studying human anatomy' (Ivey 259); she is creating a true depiction of something no-one from her culture has ever seen before. By tapping in to this old-fashioned scientific language, with its empirical claims, Ivey underlines the realism of her setting. With their touristic and frontier-scientific descriptions, both novels keep their settings realist; at the same time, they make the places strange. This is primarily a function of the narrative perspective: in *A Summer of Drowning*, even though the narrator Liv has lived on Kvaløya all her life, and considers it one of 'the real places, the home places' (*Summer* 22), Burnside is able to emphasise the sense that '[e]verything is strange here' (*Summer* 57) by directing his narrator's story at foreigners, at people unfamiliar with her home. She describes summer as: '[t]rue summer, not just white nights, the months of snow, then thaw, then snow again, finally over' (*Summer* 17). Rather than simply referring to the season, she clarifies what summer means to her, to

someone from there, and sets this against the idea she knows foreigners have of Northern Europe, the white nights. She is constantly aware of the outside impression of the landscape she inhabits, noting that the tourists were ‘surprised by how warm it could get, up here in the frozen north. They would come with sweaters and thermal socks expecting a cold, austere land – and they were disappointed’ (*Summer* 105). There is a sense of explanation here, of Liv trying to correct an impression, but it is an impression she has first set up, so she can challenge it. While Liv may scorn the tourists’ reading of her landscape, it is a perspective which persists in the text, allowing Kvaløya to be constructed as strange, even by a local narrator.

In *The Snow Child*, Ivey achieves the same effect by inserting foreign focalising characters into her landscape. Jack and Mabel arrive from Pennsylvania having been ‘warned’ that ‘the Territory of Alaska was for lost men and unsavory women, that there would be no place for [them] in the wilderness’ (Ivey 35). The town they find in Alaska is remote, too: ‘[b]ack home, Alpine wouldn’t have been called a town at all. It was nothing more than a few dusty, false-fronted buildings perched between the train tracks and the Wolverine River’ (Ivey 16). The comparison with ‘back home’ is one of many, creating distance between the characters and their landscape. The remoteness of the place is also clear: Alpine is the couple’s nearest settlement, a two-hour ride on horseback from their homestead, which is totally isolated. For Mabel it is ‘raw, austere’ (Ivey 35), like the tourists’ view of Kvaløya; for Jack, it is ‘lean and wild and indifferent to a man’s struggle’ (Ivey 63). This wildness, comparable to Burnside’s ‘northern wilderness’ (*Summer* 34), provokes awe and terror in Jack and Mabel, as they are trying to live off the land; for Liv and her mother, though, the remoteness is a blessing. Liv describes how her mother moved from Oslo to this island because it was ‘far away from everything she knew’, and was full of ‘what, at the time, must have looked like remote, empty places’ (*Summer* 21). While Liv maintains the distance between local and not – her mother, ‘at the time’ (*Summer* 21), was an incomer – she also emphasises her landscape’s sparseness.

Despite each writer’s realism, then, their creation of remote, strange, wild settings distances both the focalising characters and the implied reader from the place. This

creates a gap in knowledge, a space for a form of the marvellous which is not explicitly magical; this gap becomes the fantastic hesitation once the possibility of magic is introduced. This possibility is itself thrown up by the setting: both Alaska and Kvaløya are closely associated with the unreal through folklore, madness, and dreams, which are created by the extreme fluctuations in daylight in the far north.⁹ As Liv explains in *A Summer of Drowning*: '[t]here are people who cannot take living this far north, because of the long winter darkness, and there are others who cannot bear the endless, mind-stopping white nights of insomnia and wild imaginings' (*Summer* 17). The darkness and the light each bring dreams and madness, in both of the novels. While it is the long days of the eponymous summer of drowning which breed madness and an uncertainty about what is real and what is a dream or 'wild imagining' in Burnside's novel, in *The Snow Child* the same effect is created by the long nights. Esther warns Jack and Mabel that:

The winters are long, and sometimes it starts to get to you. Around here, they call it cabin fever. [...] [Y]our mind starts playing tricks on you. [...] You start seeing things you're afraid of...or things you've always wished for. (Ivey 80)

While each writer creates uncertainty about what can be considered real in their strange, remote, northern wilderness, the links which join madness and dreams, folklore and the natural world, differ in each novel.

The Snow Child

In *The Snow Child* the fantastic is created largely through Ivey's two main focalising characters' opposing beliefs about the eponymous snow child, Faina. For Mabel, the novel's main folkloric intertext provides the key to this child. Mabel is the one who knows the story 'Sneguorchka', in which the child is not only made of snow, but needs

⁹ Northern wildernesses, particularly in Scotland and Scandinavia, are common settings for folklore-inflected fiction. As well as *A Summer of Drowning*, Cecilia Ekbäck makes use of Scandinavia: *Wolf Winter* revolves around Blackåsen Mountain, in Swedish Lapland, said to have housed spirits for generations. The Scottish mainland has housed the devil (in Burnside's *The Devil's Footprints* (2008)) and witches (in Susan Fletcher's *Corrag* (2010)), but its islands and the seas around them are where the folklore is most prolific. Amy Sackville makes use of the selkies in the seas around Orkney in her novel of that name; Susan Fletcher's fishman in *The Silver Dark Sea*, and Jess Richards' folklore-inspired characters in *Snake Ropes* (2012), all inhabit imagined islands and their seas.

it to be covering the ground in order to stay with her adoptive parents. In the novel Faina does indeed come and go with the seasons, and even her name is linked to the landscape: it means 'the color on the snow when the sun turns' (Ivey 256). Her name is liminal, balanced on the change of light at dusk; it is also, like Faina herself, closely associated with the snow. Her eyes are 'rimmed in frost' (Ivey 161) and she is 'cool to the touch' (Ivey 223); indoors, where it is warm, she 'seem[s] to wilt in her chair' (Ivey 223) until Mabel cools her with snow brought in from outside. Snow never seems to melt on her skin: Mabel watches as '[a] single snowflake lit upon her bare skin. [...] There in the child's hand. A single snowflake, luminous and translucent. A sharp-edged miracle' (Ivey 160-1). The possibility that the girl simply regulates heat differently is challenged by the 'miracle' of the single snowflake, which should not be able to remain frozen in a human hand. The folklore gives context to this 'miracle', and encourages a marvellous reading of Faina, but it never fully cancels out the uncanny reading, in which Faina is just a normal child. The other main focalising character, Jack, is not as interested in folklore, nor as ready to believe in it as Mabel, but he, too, reaches for folklore in response to what he cannot understand:

[Jack] had always scoffed at the superstitious and mystical. Alone in the depths of the wilderness, however, in the fading winter light, he had discovered in himself an animal-like fear [...] Disturbing thoughts whirled through his brain, stories [...] about forest hags and men who turned into bears. (Ivey 95)

Jack reaches for folklore in response to the landscape, but the wilderness comes first and the folklore follows. He sets himself up as a rational person, then experiences the place, its wild strangeness and its darkness, and reaches for folklore to explain it. Jack's relationship with Faina works in the same way: to him she is 'a wild creature', who 'knew this land by heart' (Ivey 67), and she is therefore associated with Jack's fear of the landscape: '[i]t wasn't the girl that frightened him as much as the strange world of snow and rock and hushed trees that she navigated with ease' (Ivey 95). By associating the child with the potentially marvellous setting, Jack sees her as fantastic as well:

There was something otherworldly in her manners and appearance, her frosty lashes and cool blue stare, the way she materialized out of the forest. In ways she was clearly just a little girl, with her small frame and rare, stifled giggles, but in others she seemed composed and wise, as if she

moved through the world with knowledge beyond anything Jack had encountered. (Ivey 105)

Her doubleness is what makes her fantastic: she is at once a real girl and a strange, snow-bound creature. However, it is her familiarity with the landscape and the strangeness of her local knowledge which lends her her magic, not, in Jack's narrative, her association with folklore. Even when Jack refuses to read Faina as folkloric, she remains fantastic: 'Jack wasn't one to believe in fairy-tale maidens made of snow. Yet Faina was extraordinary. Vast mountain ranges and unending wilderness, sky and ice. You couldn't hold her too close or know her mind' (Ivey 242). Faina is a cipher for the landscape itself, and Jack and Mabel's quest to tame the child runs along similar lines to their desperate need to understand the landscape enough to make a living from it; both the child and the place are described as partly unknowable by Mabel and Jack. I will explore this unknowability further in the next chapter; for now it is enough to note that it creates a gap which Ivey's realism cannot fill, and creates the possibility of a magical or marvellous explanation. At the same time, the possibility of an uncanny or rational explanation for the events in the novel is retained, and folklore is occasionally used in the service of this alternative. Chasing Faina through the woods, Jack wonders:

What did he expect to find? A fairy-tale beast that holds young girls captive in a mountain cave? A cackling witch? Or nothing at all, no child, no tracks, no door, only insanity bared in the untouched snow? (Ivey 97)

Here the character envisages two distinct possibilities: folkloric magic (although not from Ransome's tale), and madness. Mabel, too, worries about the 'dark winter's madness' (Ivey 138). Rather than lending magic to the landscape, this possibility of madness lends weight to the realism of the text. It implies that the fantastic hesitation – the possibility of a magical child made of snow – can be explained away in rational terms: Jack and Mabel's longing for a child has driven them mad, and they have merely imagined Faina in the dark wilderness of Alaska. This link to the natural world is again crucial. It is in darkness that they dream, Jack of 'children [who] ran soft-footed through the trees' (Ivey 51) and Mabel of '[s]nowflakes and naked babies' (Ivey 89); the dreams themselves are seen as products of the landscape, because they 'fell and melted like snowflakes' (Ivey 51). It is in the darkness of the long, northern winter that the

possibility of madness is strongest: when '[d]arkness settled around the cabin [...] Mabel glanced out the window occasionally with the thought that she might see the child, but there was only her own reflection' (Ivey 81). Like in the window, Faina's presence in the text could be simply a reflection of Mabel's longing for a child.

Ivey sets up a duality between marvellous magic given space in the snowy landscape, and uncanny madness left unchecked in the wilderness. It is not this duality itself which creates the fantastic, as a kind of average between the marvellous and the uncanny; instead it is the movement between them, across the borderline of the fantastic, which prevents the hesitation from being resolved. Ivey creates this movement through the use of more than one focalising character, and the shifts of belief they each undergo over the course of the novel. Jack is at first unsure of Faina's reality: he sees her through unreliable eyes when he is 'groggy with sleep' (Ivey 49). He then tracks her through the woods to discover the truth, and thinks that she moves 'like a fairy' (Ivey 95), so quickly that 'she had become a phantom, a silent blur' (Ivey 96). Her knowledge of the landscape, the fact that there could be a non-magical explanation for her fast, deft movement through it, is quashed beneath these marvellous descriptions. From Jack's perspective, though, the switch from belief in something 'otherworldly' and potentially magical to full disbelief comes when he finds Faina's real father, dead from drink in the snow. He later refers to this scene as the fact which prevents him from believing in Faina's magic, but even within this supposedly realist scene there are elements of the marvellous. As Jack watches Faina throw snow over her father's grave, he notices that '[i]t was more snow than a child could possibly hold in her arms' (Ivey 115); the folkloric association between Faina and the snow remains. While Jack moves from belief to disbelief without fully removing the possibility of the fantastic, Mabel moves in the other direction. She thinks the girl Jack has seen in the woods 'must have wandered away from somebody's cabin' (Ivey 56), and worries about a real girl out in the snow. However:

She had sought reasonable explanations. She asked Esther about children who lived nearby. She urged Jack to inquire in town. But she had also taken note of those first boot prints in the snow – they began at the vanished snow child and ran from there into the woods. No tracks came into the yard. (Ivey 90)

Mabel comes to accept the folkloric, marvellous interpretation of Faina's existence, using the footprints as a kind of evidence for her belief. These shifts continue through the novel, with each chapter focalising a different character; because of these constant shifts, not only within each character's perspective but between the two, the reader is left with no stable source from which to glean whether Faina is real or not. The fantastic hesitation is created here through an oscillation between the marvellous possibility that these characters are living in a folkloric landscape where magic really does exist, and the realist possibility that the potential magic in the landscape and in Faina is simply the result of madness, or darkness-created dreams.

A Summer of Drowning

In Burnside's novel the fantastic is created differently. Rather than moving between different ways of seeing the world which are discrete and separate, thereby creating uncertainty in the reader, *A Summer of Drowning* contains these different perspectives within a single narrative point of view which is itself uncertain. Despite this difference in construction, Burnside's novel contains many of the same associations as Ivey's. Dreams and madness are again associated with the natural world, and are used to erode the possibility of the supernatural. As Liv's mother describes to a visitor: '[t]he winters are long [...] And the summers are sleepless. Everybody goes a little crazy from time to time' (*Summer* 96). Even the narrator is afflicted by a kind of madness, but it is not the madness of 'seeing things', as one section of the novel is titled. Hers is a clinical madness, a temporary insanity which is the *result* of witnessing what she believes to be a supernatural event, not its cause. This is linked directly to the novel's main folkloric intertext, the huldra legend – where a creature in the shape of a woman seduces men into drowning – but after Liv sees the creature which may or may not be this huldra, she records her symptoms almost medically: 'I ran a high fever that night, and [Mother] couldn't get me to eat. I was shivering, and I couldn't talk for a long time, but I did drink' (*Summer* 318). This episode is referred to as a 'madness' (Burnside 319), a 'breakdown' or a 'crisis' (*Summer* 320), and also as an 'illness' (*Summer* 318): all terms for mental illness. This can be read as a rational explanation of the strange creature Liv

saw in the woods: it did not exist, because Liv was crazy, perhaps because of the white nights of the far northern summer. But there is another interpretation, which Burnside gestures towards. In this reading, there really is ‘a gap – a dark, clean tear – in the fabric of the world’ (*Summer* 321): reality is not what we think it is, and it *does* contain magic, but being forced to recognise this is such a profound shock that Liv’s brain cannot take it, and temporarily shuts down. Even in its use of madness, then, *A Summer of Drowning* maintains a fantastic hesitation between the rational and the magical. The real risk, for Liv, is not *being* mad but *seeming* mad: she worries that ‘if I tried to talk about what I *did* see, the people in the town would think I was crazy, just like Kyrre Opdahl’ (*Summer* 6, original emphasis). Kyrre is her neighbour and the island’s storyteller, who tells Liv and the reader the story of the huldra in the first place. Already the constellation of nature, folklore, madness, and dream is clear: unlike *The Snow Child*, *A Summer of Drowning* does not separate them out. In Ivey’s novel the fantastic is created through a triangulation of realism, madness, and dream, opposed to the natural world and the folktale; here, in *A Summer of Drowning*, the fantastic is created within each one of these facets.

The clearest example of this comes at the disappearance of Martin Crosbie. Liv thinks that his presumed drowning might have been ‘a trick my mind had played on me’ (*Summer* 270) – a kind of madness – or ‘a leftover from one of Kyrre’s old tales’ (*Summer* 270) – a folkloric form of magic. She also, along with her mother, thinks that perhaps it was caused by the dreamlike quality of the midnight sun: ‘In the morning, I would wake and, like Alice, I would see that it was all nothing more than a curious dream’ (*Summer* 270). She was, perhaps, ‘confused by the light and the unreality of it all’ (*Summer* 271). The time of year destabilises Liv’s sense of reality; despite this, we are told categorically that ‘[i]t wasn’t a dream’ (*Summer* 270), that this event really happened. Liv’s final summary of this episode rejects the possibilities of madness and dreams, linking the disappearance instead to folklore and nature: it was ‘a story that was neither a murder, not a suicide, but a natural event, like a rainstorm, or a bird migration’ (*Summer* 271). Like these natural occurrences, legends such as that of the huldra are here linked inextricably to the landscape: not only are they stories which are

local to Norway and particularly its coastlines, they are also consistently linked to the idea of the natural world, to the physical geography of the place. We are told that '[t]he old stories persist in the wood of the boathouses and the ferry docks' (*Summer* 22); the place itself is impregnated with folklore. Liv, too, feels that it is 'the stories, that, more than anything else, bind me so closely to this place' (*Summer* 69). Kyrre, the storyteller, is 'part and parcel of the island' (*Summer* 28), 'part of nature' (*Summer* 92), and he seems to Liv to be not just an old man, but 'old like the carved rocks in Mother's garden, old like the weather, or the tides' (*Summer* 92). While the folkloric stories and their teller add their air of unreality to the place-specific uncertainty provoked by the white nights, Burnside is not creating a magical world to set against a realist one here. Instead, he describes a conception of nature which refutes that separation: nature is itself fantastic, containing both the magical and the rational, and refusing to choose between them.

In *A Summer of Drowning*, then, the folklore is tied to the land, and it is the folklore which gives the land its fantastic hesitation. Describing a stretch of coastline she has named the 'end of the earth', Liv tells us that she chose this name because she was 'thinking partly of a real place and partly of the true remoteness in some old fairy story' (*Summer* 241). This landscape is fantastic in the Todorovian sense – on the borderline between the magical and the real – but here, as we saw above, the fantastic includes the folkloric. For Ivey, though, the fantastic exists before the folklore; the Alaskan wilderness has a kind of magic of its own, which comes from the wilderness of the place rather than a specific tale or legend: '[i]t was the river's source – a glacier cradled between white mountains. From so many miles away, the craggy peaks seemed to waver in the sunlight like a mirage, close and distant, real and unreal' (Ivey 326). This 'waver' is not folkloric, but it is fantastic; it is, in fact, the same word Lynette Hunter has used to describe how the real and the marvellous relate to each other in fantastic narrative (128). Ivey's novel oscillates between the real and the unreal, constantly crossing the fantastic borderline Todorov described, as her folktale intertext lends itself to a less constant use of the fantastic, while Burnside's novel statically inhabits the hesitation, as a result of the legend from which he takes his plot: his world is real and unreal at the same time.

Each novel's fantastic landscape, though, is inclusive. The Alaskan peaks and the Norwegian coast are both real and unreal – their two truths overlap, and each is given equal weight. These doubled truths, resulting from Burnside and Ivey's use of the fantastic, are paradoxically akin to what Huber has described as post-postmodern realism. This is 'a realism of defiance that knows its truth claims to be contestable but nevertheless does not eschew them' (Huber 26). For Huber, such realism has absorbed the lessons of postmodernism, specifically its distrust of truth claims which assert any kind of universality, with the result that, in twenty-first-century fiction, any claims to truth or reality made by a return to realism are fleeting and contingent. This is in part due to the success of postmodernism's critique of grand narratives: for writers like Burnside and Ivey, as well as for Huber, it is no longer important to foreground the idea that truth is contingent, because this idea has become simply part of the background against which they are working. They have not reneged on this postmodern premise, but have instead accepted it. They have learned the lessons of postmodernism and are now attempting to answer the question: where do we go from here? Part of the answer to this question involves a move towards realism, which for Burnside and Ivey means writing in the fantastic mode: here, while any version of reality they set out is temporary and contingent, they do not need to shy away from setting out these realities in the first place.

Chapter 2

After demythologizing: ‘the passive stance of enrapturement’

Political disengagement

Another part of the answer to the question of where fiction goes from here involves a reassessment of the overt and often radical political engagement of much postmodernist fiction. This explicit political critique is a significant part of the ‘cultural setting’ in which contemporary writers are working today, and the comparative lack of it in recent fiction – what Huber calls a ‘withdrawal from socio-political issues’ (253) – has caused some critical consternation. Huber describes recent novels that ‘[i]n their rejection of subversion, [...] are reconciliatory rather than oppositional, reconstructive rather than revolutionary’ (254). Brooks and Toth, too, mark this withdrawal. They see it as a potentially dangerous development, warning that ‘we must be wary of reactionary and conservative blindness, of irresponsible rejections of critical and theoretical doubt, of nostalgic returns to unchecked idealism’ (Brooks and Toth 11).

It is certainly possible to counter this note of caution by pointing to the folklore-inflected novels which are, in fact, engaged in a similar kind of demythologizing as their postmodernist forebears, and to draw a line of continuity from the fairy-tale generation to contemporary work, particularly by those same fairy-tale generation writers. Margaret Atwood’s *Penelopiad*, for example, retells the *Odyssey* from the point of view of patient Penelope, speaking in her own voice from the afterlife; Atwood also places particular emphasis on the twelve women who fraternised with Penelope’s suitors, at her instruction, and who Odysseus and Telemachus killed for what they saw as sexual treachery. Like Carter, Byatt, and others, Atwood here seeks to reinscribe women into a story which had traditionally marginalised them, in part by giving them voice in her fiction. Alongside further reappraisals of gender and other now familiar areas of scrutiny, different preoccupations are emerging among contemporary writers. Books are appearing – such as Ali Smith’s *Boy Meets Girl* (2007), Jess Richards’ *Cooking With Bones* (2013), and Neil Gaiman’s *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (2014) – which are ‘queering’ their folkloric intertexts. This term has been around for a long time in

contemporary criticism, and does not only include the homosexuality prominent in Gaiman and Smith's books (something Patricia Duncker accused Carter in particular of being unable to imagine¹⁰) but points to a much more fluid, non-binary conception of gender: Richards' novel includes a character – whose chapters are narrated in the first person – assumed to be a girl until they are revealed to be a cross-dressing boy, but the character is never pinned down into a single gender.¹¹ These novels make up a line of descent from the fairy-tale generation which certainly deserves further study, but it is distinct from the line I have been tracing through the folklore-inflected novels of Burnside, Ivey, and Ness. In the latter group of texts, the fears expressed by Brooks, Toth, Huber, and others do appear to be to an extent justified.

Many of these folklore-inflected novels seem to renege on aspects of feminist poetics by objectifying the central fantastic, folkloric, female character. By locating the fantastic hesitation in these women, the novels make them objects of desire – and this desire is always thwarted, meaning the women are never 'known'. All these folkloric women disappear in fantastic circumstances: in the multiple denouements to *The Crane Wife*, Kumiko both dies in a fire and transforms into a crane, in each case disappearing from George's life, and from the narrative. In *Orkney* Richard's unnamed wife disappears without explanation or trace, presumably into the sea, either as a drowning victim or a selkie. In *A Summer of Drowning* Maia, who may or may not be the huldra, disappears at the end of the summer, and in *The Snow Child*, Faina, too, vanishes into

¹⁰ 'She could never imagine Cinderella in bed with the Fairy Godmother' (Duncker 8).

¹¹ Similar issues appear in fairy tale criticism, where critics are exploring the potential for queering in both traditional collections and newer adaptations. See, for example, *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* by Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill (2012) and *Queer Enchantments: Gender, Sexuality and Class in the Fairy Tale Cinema of Jacques Demy* by Anne E. Duggan (2013), among others.

As well as broadening out conceptions of gender, a shift has occurred which can be called 'relocating' (Bacchilega) or 'decolonising' (Haase). Bacchilega describes it as follows: 'creolizing and indigenizing, both of which are imbricated with queering, are grounds [...] for a decolonizing transformation of both storyworld and world' (*Fairy Tales* 37-8). Some version of this idea of 'relocating' is clearly at work in fairy tale criticism at large. Sandra L. Beckett's recent books on international versions of 'Little Red Riding Hood' and Ulrich Marzolph's collection *The Arabian Nights in Transnational Perspective* are both evidence of a burgeoning critical interest in tales' trans- or multi-cultural roots, while collections like *Grimm's Tales Around the Globe: The Dynamics of Their International Reception*, edited by Vanessa Joosen and Gillian Lathey, delve into the global spread of a set of particularly situated versions.

the snowy landscape. None of these women are given voice, as either narrators or focalising characters, and with the notable exception of Maia in Burnside's novel, they are all sought after.¹² In *The Crane Wife*, for example, Kumiko is put in the typical position of an unknowable object: George knows neither where she is from nor, in any meaningful detail, where she has lived; she does not tell him the story of her life. He worries that '[h]e knew so very, very little about her. Still' (Ness 140); later, he complains to her that: '[y]ou keep so much of yourself from me. *Still*' (Ness 189). In both scenes he is loving, but his love is grasping and acquisitive, and while the two lines echo each other, there is a shift between them, from George seeing Kumiko as passively unknown to blaming her for actively keeping back the knowledge he wants. Her reticence makes him feel '[a]lone. Unaccompanied even when she was right there with him' (Ness 227); it also makes him demanding. He bursts into her flat – hitherto 'another facet of Kumiko's mystery' (Ness 229) that George has never seen – and pushes into her bedroom, where '[h]e knows, in an instant, that all would have been well, that the future would have taken care of itself, if he had never come here' (Ness 234). George could, he thinks, have held on to Kumiko, if he had let her have her own space and not wanted to know more about her than she was willing to share. This is a nod to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as well as a moment of fantastic hesitation. As I have shown elsewhere, this revelation and its surrounding scene are set apart from the main body of the text by a different typeface and tense – those in which Ness's folk tale are written.¹³ Kumiko 'is not Kumiko at all, she is a great white bird, pulling out a feather' from her chest (Ness 234); but after the revelation of his own acquisitive destructiveness, George 'woke on the small, anonymous sofa' to see Kumiko 'featherless' (Ness 235), as if it had all been a fever dream. The use of the fantastic here increases the distance between George, the focalising character, and Kumiko, making her seem more unknowable. However, George's realisation of his error is in its own way a feminist narrative: he

¹² This is something I aim to remedy in my own novel, *Depths*, by focalising part of the narrative through the fantastic female character, Mary.

¹³ See Sara Helen Binney. 'Oscillating Towards the Sublime: Fantastic Folklore and Patrick Ness's Novel *The Crane Wife*.' *Notes on Metamodernism*. 2 April 2015. www.metamodernism.com/2015/04/02/oscillating-towards-the-sublime-2/. Accessed 4 April 2016.

moves away from being acquisitive, understands why it was not working, and stops chasing the woman. The character's relationship with Kumiko may not survive his actions, but arguably he is punished for them by losing her. This is quite apart from the other strands of the novel, which centre around female characters and their various relationships and professional lives; *The Crane Wife* may not be a feminist polemic, but it does not embody the 'reactionary and conservative blindness' that Brooks and Toth fear (11).

The Snow Child, too, has a quietened feminism which is not always centre stage. Mabel's emancipation may be a sub-plot which often fades into the background, but it is a telling one. Early on in the novel she sees herself as 'an uptight, Back-East woman' (Ivey 26) who dislikes speaking out in 'mixed company' (Ivey 33); surrounding her are women like 'Betty, wearing her men's shirts and work pants' (Ivey 35), and her neighbour 'Esther in her men's overalls – how confidently she strode into the kitchen and flung the dead turkey onto the counter. Mabel had never met a woman like her' (Ivey 41). Mabel does not stride or fling or wear 'men's' clothes; she sits still, '[w]ith her hands in her lap, her back straight' (Ivey 30). Later on, though, she begins to do farm work and to be a properly equal partner in the running of the homestead, to the point that Jack is grateful to her because 'she was right there beside him, the same dirt on her hands, the same thoughts on her mind' (Ivey 201). This is not a binary reversal of a power imbalance, but it is a feminist narrative nonetheless. Like in *The Crane Wife*, though, this feminist narrative of emancipation is complicated, in this case by its link with Mabel and Jack's negotiation of the strange, wild, remote landscape.

The Snow Child is consistent in its concern with trying to pin down and capture both the wilderness and its cipher, Faina, whose unknowable fantastic status I explored in the previous chapter. Mabel herself tries consistently to understand the place and the child through the visual art which she sees and creates. Ivey's ekphrasis both reaches towards and keeps at arm's length the two unknowns of the novel, thereby embodying what W. J. T. Mitchell has called 'ekphrastic hope' and 'ekphrastic fear' (4-5). While 'the treatment of the ekphrastic image as a female other is a commonplace in the genre' (Mitchell 26), 'gender is not the unique key to the workings of ekphrasis, but only one

among many figures of difference that energize the dialectic of the imagetext' (47). Here, while Faina is yet another figure of feminine otherness, the main figure of difference is what she represents: the natural world. Even in the Russian storybook where Mabel finds the folk tale 'Snegurochka', she cannot read or interpret the landscape and its animals: '[d]id they love the little girl, or did they want to eat her? All these years later, Mabel still could find no answers in the wild, gleaming eyes' (Ivey 129). The wilderness, like the folklore itself, resists being pinned down by a single interpretation; the fantastic hesitation which surrounds Faina adds to the othering of the landscape. As well as reacting to visual art, Mabel creates it, and Ivey links Mabel's desire to draw directly to both Faina and the landscape. The moments when Mabel 'felt the urge to draw so strongly' are when she is most affected by '[t]he snowy hillsides, the open sky' (Ivey 256). Like George's desire to know Kumiko, this is an acquisitive urge: she hopes that '[m]aybe here on the page she could reduce it to line and curve and at last understand it' (Ivey 257). This is certainly how her relatives 'back East' see the work she sends to them, but Mabel sees her work as less successful. The same association between art and capture is made when Mabel tries to sketch Faina:

With each stroke of the pencil, it was as if Mabel had been granted her wish, as if she held the child in her arms, caressed her cheek, stroked her hair. [...] [S]omething in the turn of her head, the tilt of her eyes, hinted at a wildness Mabel wanted to capture, too. (Ivey 123)

Mabel herself sees Faina as a cipher for the landscape here; both are strange, unknowable objects of desire. Faina's fantastic nature keeps her unknowable, and, as we have seen, the wilderness is constructed as the unknowable other of Jack and Mabel's centre, 'back East'. Mabel's acquisitive desire is not presented as straightforward, however: the girl, like the landscape above, would be 'reduced' if caught and captured by Mabel's art, and, as in *The Crane Wife*, Mabel's acquisitive desire does not last throughout the novel. Here the change is much more marked, as Mabel relinquishes the need to control and demarcate: she sees an otter in a stream, but '[s]he told no-one of the otter. Garrett would want to trap it; Faina would ask her to draw it. She refused to confine it by any means' (Ivey 280). This may retain the unhelpful opposition between civilised self and wild other, but the characters' perspectives have shifted. Not only has Mabel moved

from trying to acquire and pin down what she does not know, but Faina, too, has changed. While she never ceases to be the unknowable, wild character at the heart of the novel's fantastic hesitation, here she also becomes the acquirer, the one trying to pin down what is wild by asking Mabel to draw it. Mabel allows the otter space to exist by keeping silent about it, by refusing to speak or share what she has seen. When Faina disappears, an analogous shift takes place:

Mabel no longer shouted Faina's name into the wilderness or tried to think of ways to make her stay. Instead, she sat at the table and by candlelight sketched her face – impish chin, clever eyes. Then she tucked these sketches into the leather-covered children's book that told the story of the snow maiden. (Ivey 282)

She has let Faina go in the same way that she did the otter, but here, instead of only silence, art is her response to what she cannot understand. Mabel's art relates to its object the way ekphrastic description does, by gesturing towards, but no longer attempting to pin down, what it describes. The same is true for the book containing the unreadable Russian text and illustrations of 'Snegurochka'. Perhaps it is possible to judge these gaps at the heart of *The Snow Child's* artworks by the 'demythologizing' standards of much postmodernist fairy-tale fiction, and to find them lacking. However, while neither *The Snow Child* nor *The Crane Wife* foregrounds concerns of gender politics, both do seem to have learned the lessons of their feminist forebears, and to be building on them. This is the same reorientation which led to these novelists' use of the fantastic to create contingent, post-postmodern truths, and, again, it can be seen as testifying to the success of the postmodernist fairy-tale generation: writers of twenty-first-century folklore-inflected fiction do not see in their folkloric intertexts the same need to foreground gendered reversals as the postmodernist writers who came before them, precisely because those of postmodernist forebears' success.

Despite this, it is not enough to judge recent fiction in this way: to simply assess their success or failure as subversive or radical works is insufficient. This was in fact noted by Merja Makinen, writing about postmodernist fairy-tale fiction: '[t]he argument that postmodern intertextuality can be radical and political [...] has pushed the descriptive terms into an evaluative binary: parody radical (good), pastiche conservative (bad)' (147). While this binary is unhelpful, it is ever-present, as Huber and Brooks and

Toth have shown. As contemporary folklore-inflected novels turn from irony to sincerity, and from magic to the fantastic, they also turn away from overt radical politics – and this, however problematic it may seem, is an important part of the twenty-first-century reorientation away from postmodernist fiction. It is a turn critics must be prepared to follow.

‘Space for the mystery’

If these novels are turning away from radical politics and the ‘demythologizing’ of the fairy-tale generation, what are they turning towards? The answer to this question does not involve a return to mythologizing, or a remythologizing, but it does require a reassessment of the role of a kind of enchantment – what in Burnside’s novel is called ‘mystery’. My hesitancy over these words is deliberate. This ‘mystery’ is a point of crossover between several terms – wonder, the sublime, the sacred, and enchantment – which, while related, have distinct critical histories and uses. As I examine other commentators’ uses of these terms and sketch out their common ground below I am not seeking to elide these distinctions. Nor am I attempting to provide comprehensive histories for any of these terms and the ideas to which they refer. Rather, I am searching, as many of the novels under discussion do, for the most appropriate language to describe the textual gestures towards the unknown which many contemporary folklore-inflected novels foreground.

I will begin with what is perhaps the most common of the four terms, in fairy-tale studies: wonder. ‘Fairy tale’, after all, is often considered synonymous with ‘wonder tale’, a translation of the German *märchen*. Writing about twenty-first-century adaptations of fairy tales, Cristina Bacchilega describes these fictions as creating wonder. Her definition comes from Marina Warner:

Wonder has no opposite; it springs up already doubled in itself, compounded of dread and desire at once, attraction and recoil, producing a thrill, the shudder of pleasure and of fear. It names the marvel, the prodigy, the surprise as well as the responses they excite, of fascination and inquiry; it conveys the active motion towards experience and the passive stance of enrapturement. (*Wonder* 3)

Here is both fear and delight, both stoppage and a movement forwards, both

characteristics which, according to historians Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, were integral parts of the pre-Enlightenment concept of wonder. ‘Wonder fused with fear (for example, at a monstrous birth taken as a portent of divine wrath) was akin but not identical to wonder fused with pleasure (at the same monstrous birth displayed in a *Wunderkammer*)’, a cabinet of curiosities (Daston and Park 15). While Bacchilega acknowledges this duality, as well as the duality of meaning in the word itself as both verb and noun, she places more emphasis on the positive, active side, the side of delight. For her, the wonder of fairy tales is a spur to curiosity, questioning, and, often, critique. She describes how fairy-tale tellers and adaptors through the ages have been ‘looking to renew wonder in its complexity as both state and action, in response to the unfamiliar, the unexplained[...], and calling for our own active – and, even more so, activist – responses to and participation in the process of storytelling and interpretation’ (*Fairy Tales* 194). She claims wonder as a response to the unexplained, and action – activism, even – as a response to the state of wondering, and she sees this active response to wonder not only in the fairy-tale fiction of postmodernist writers but in more recent filmic and internet-based adaptations.

In contradistinction to this, in the folklore-inflected fictions of the twenty-first century which I have been exploring it is the ‘passive stance of enrapturement’ which is given more space. We have seen how these novels create unknowable characters and spaces; in *A Summer of Drowning*, too, the narrator wants ‘to make a little space for the mystery’ (*Summer* 328). She does this by drawing maps which are sold as art, but she does not move towards a resolution of the mystery. In all of these novels, a fantastic hesitation, a refusal of explanation, is retained, and in *The Crane Wife* Kumiko explains why:

Stories never explain. [...] No, a story is not an explanation, it is a net, a net through which the truth flows. The net catches some of the truth, but not all, *never* all, only enough so that we can live with the extraordinary without it killing us. (Ness 141-2)

This is, in different language, the same claim as Irmtraud Huber makes for twenty-first century fiction: fiction which ‘knows its truth claims to be contestable but nevertheless does not eschew them’ (Huber 26). Rather than using wonder as a spur towards

explanation and further comprehension, these novels use it to pause in a stance of 'passive enrapturement' with what they do not understand. This can be seen not only in Burnside's narrator's desire to 'space for the mystery', but at the end of *The Crane Wife*, too. The novel concludes with George in a moment of pausing: '[h]e answered the phone to his daughter with a broken but joyous heart, ready to speak with her of astonishment and wonder' (Ness 305). He may be about to act, to speak of his experiences and to write them down, but this ending is poised in that still moment of being 'ready'.

While this pausing can be seen as simply one half of the doubled wonder Warner describes, the duality of active or activist wonder and passive, static wonder has been described in slightly different terms by Philip Fisher. He draws the same distinction between delight and fear as do Bacchilega and Warner, but he uses the term 'wonder' only for that which causes delight. The other half of this binary he associates with the sublime. For Fisher, wonder is the aestheticization of the 'pleasure principle' while the sublime is that of the 'death principle' (2). This is a useful distinction, but just as wonder is 'doubled in itself', the sublime, too, has been described as containing both the positive and negative aspects described above. For Kant, the sublime is a 'momentary checking of the vital powers and a consequent stronger outflow of them' (102), a short-lived pause marked by a feeling of both terror and delight. This sensation, which he considered to be produced by the sight of something vast or infinite, like a far-off mountain or a distant thunderstorm, was one of pleasurable pain, or 'negative pleasure' (Kant 102). It diminishes, but does not exclude, the joy and delight which is proper to wonder, just as wonder contains an element of the stoppage caused by the sublime. While Warner's definition of wonder is crucial for understanding how 'wonder tales', fairy tales, interact with the novel, the Kantian sublime seems a more precise description of the orientation of twenty-first-century folklore-inflected novels. This is most clearly seen in its function as a temporary pause of 'passive enrapturement', or what Neil Hertz has called a blockage (40). In *The Crane Wife*, George experiences a sublime moment 'where the world dwindled down to almost no one, where it seemed to pause just for him' (Ness 11). This leads to 'a consequent stronger outflow' (Kant 102) of energy,

allowing George to, ‘for a moment, be seized into life’ (Ness 11). The similarity between Kant’s description of the sublime and Ness’s description in *The Crane Wife* is striking, but the novels do more than describe the sublime from the outside. In refusing to demythologize, in allowing the unexplained to be just that, the folklore-inflected fiction of the twenty-first century makes space for the sublime within the text, representing it as a literal pause: a stoppage of language. This is figured through the frequent use of visual art, and through the novels’ use of silence.

Art and silence

Unsurprisingly perhaps, and certainly problematically, the sublime and the art and silence which represent it are centred around the unknowable, fantastic female characters in all of these novels. The starkest example of this comes in *Orkney*, where Richard’s wife’s absence is made textual. When Richard loses sight of her on the beach, he says:

I will go out to her. Out on the beach, she

she is gone. (Sackville 161)

The woman’s absence from view is not only an absence from the text, but an absence *of* text; she is represented through blank space. The text literally stops, for a moment, to contemplate something it cannot represent, before continuing: this is the textual version of Kant’s ‘momentary checking of the vital powers and consequent stronger outflow of them’ (102). *Orkney* is an extreme example, but the same association between textual silence and sublimity is present in other examples of contemporary folklore-inflected fiction. In *The Crane Wife*, too, the unknowable, folkloric character inspires silence. When George first meets her, he says:

‘I didn’t hear the door –’

‘...’

‘...’

‘...’

‘Can I...?’

‘My name,’ she said, ‘is Kumiko.’ (Ness 25)

This is not the narratorial silence of a blank page, as in Sackville’s novel, but a moment

of wordlessness between characters. Rather than narrate the moment, and put words to the characters' instant connection, Ness uses ellipses to simply gesture towards it. The dialogue which surrounds this moment is itself incomplete: George cuts himself off with a dash when he sees Kumiko, and falters into silence when he tries to speak to her. Only Kumiko herself is sure of her language; she is the catalyst for silence in others. Faina, in *The Snow Child*, is herself silent, or potentially so. While the dialogue is generally placed in quotation marks, when Faina is involved in a conversation, there are none:

Do you want me to stay? he asked Faina. Maybe you should come in
now, anyways?
No, she said gently. Go inside. (Ivey 392)

The contrast is especially stark here, at the end of the novel, when Faina disappears:

Faina. Aren't you here, at my side?
But she wasn't.
'She must be in the cabin, tending the baby.'
'No, she isn't there.' (Ivey 393)

Demarcating the dialogue like this gives an otherworldliness to Faina and the conversations other characters have with her. It also puts Faina's dialogue on the same textual level as internal thoughts. Later on: 'Mabel saw the wedding quilt buried in snow. How could she be so negligent? She picked it up' (Ivey 393). Her thought – of her own negligence – is staged in the same way as Faina's dialogue, implying that perhaps Faina's speech is all in Mabel's head, too. This simple trick of punctuation deepens the fantastic hesitation surrounding Faina, but it is not the lack of quotation marks itself which does this; unmarked dialogue is after all a common feature of modern and contemporary fiction. Rather it is the change between the two styles which causes Faina's dialogue to seem imagined in contrast with the marked, realist dialogue of the other characters. Faina may not inspire silence in the other characters like Kumiko, or textual silence like Richard's wife, but her words are only tentatively real within the world of the novel; all three of these characters inspire or enact a form of wordlessness, or silence.

In addition, these characters all inspire and/or produce visual art. This art is, as we saw above in Mabel's drawings, created with a gap at its centre, and this gap is emphasised by the silence which surrounds the works of art. In *The Snow Child*, after

Mabel draws these pictures, she puts them away; ‘never would she speak’ of either the story or the images again (Ivey 347). Jack, too, when he finds the images later on, leaves them ‘unmentioned’ (Ivey 399). In *The Crane Wife*, George’s daughter Amanda says that her tile ‘was precious to her for deeper reasons [than its monetary value], ones she couldn’t properly articulate to herself, much less be able to explain if anyone asked’ (Ness 151). Like Jack’s reaction to Mabel’s drawings, the character’s response to the artworks is posited as indescribable, something words can only point at, not encompass. As well as surrounding the artworks with silence through their own refusal, in Mabel’s case, and inability, in Amanda’s, to speak of them, the characters’ silence is extended to interpretation of the artworks. Jack responds to the images by thinking that: ‘[i]n the soft pencil marks something was captured that he had sensed but never could have expressed’ (Ivey 398). What is ‘captured’ here is not Faina herself, nor the wild, unknowable landscape of Alaska; it is not fully explained or described. Jack thinks of it as ‘a kind of warm, weighted life’ (Ivey 399) which Faina developed, but this vague description, not even specified beyond ‘a kind of’, does not, as the pictures do, represent what he means. It is a sublime moment of refusal – of interpretation, of speech – and is akin to Mabel’s refusal to draw the otter: both are rejecting their desire to acquire or capture something, and are instead responding with silence. While Ivey gestures towards this silence and wordlessness by using other words, Ness, as we have seen, uses ellipses: in *The Crane Wife* the characters attempt, but fail, to describe their reactions to the tiles. George’s initial response to Kumiko’s work is not total speechlessness, but a failure to grasp the words he is reaching for:

‘Your pictures are...’ George started, and faltered.
‘And again, the sentence you cannot finish.’
‘No, I was going to say, they’re...’ Still the word failed him. ‘They’re...’
(Ness 71-2)

As Kumiko points out, the tiles are described precisely by an unfinished sentence, by a wordless ellipsis, and in this way they evoke the sublime, that pause before being ‘seized back into life’. This return to life happens when George eventually does finish the sentence, which, as I showed in my introduction, he has to cajole himself into: ‘[h]er face [...] was so beautiful and kind and somehow looking right back at George that to

hell with it, in he went, “They’re like looking at a piece of my soul” (Ness 72). The risks associated by David Foster Wallace with sincerity – the ‘[a]ccusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity’ (Wallace 193) – are run by both the character and the novel, and they are, and are evoked by, a sublime reaching. Ness’s character is forced to pause by the sublimity of the artwork, and he reaches, with difficulty, for the words to describe how it makes him feel. The fragmented, visual image he reaches for – it is only a piece of his soul, he says, not his whole soul – does not make any claim to totality. Instead, both Ness, here, and Ivey, as we saw above, use the Kantian sublime created by gaps or stoppages of language in what John McClure has called ‘a form of reaching’ (‘Postmodern’ 152).

Resacralizing the twenty-first century

McClure was writing in the context of what he called a post-secular ‘resacralization’ (‘Postmodern’ 153). It may seem counter-intuitive to align the decidedly post-postmodern, twenty-first-century texts under discussion with an idea that was in fact proposed in relation to postmodernist novels: McClure’s 1995 essay in which he set out his vision of the post-secular focused on Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo – both writers firmly associated with postmodernism. McClure, too, considers himself one of the ‘postmoderns’ (161), even though postmodernism is often associated with the secular, and with what Ihab Hassan has described as ‘our intellectual culture of disbelief’ (25). Despite this, for McClure the post-secular resonates with postmodernist concerns for contingency and fragmentation: it is ‘a form of reaching’ (‘Postmodern’ 152), but one which wants ‘simultaneously to reach and to resist grasping’ (153). I would argue that the post-secular, rather than belonging to either postmodernism or the contemporary literature developing in its wake, can be seen to be functioning as one of Jameson’s threads rising to prominence. The post-secular began its ascent as postmodernism was ebbing, and so, at the time of McClure’s essay, they overlapped; subsequently, the post-secular, and the resacralization which has come with it, have continued to rise to prominence as postmodernism has declined.

This ascent can be tracked through criticism from McClure’s essay to the present.

For McClure, the sacred drew on ‘animism, pantheism, and panentheism’ (157) as much as on Christianity and Judaism; this broad spiritual focus is retained by Hassan in 2003 in an essay marking a move away from postmodernism. Describing ‘spirit’ in contemporary literature, he says that ‘[c]ertainly, it would not mean atavism, fundamentalism, or occultism; it may not mean adherence to orthodox religions – Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam – though it would not exclude them’ (Hassan 25). More recently, Andrew Tate claimed a ‘now widely recognised [...] “sacred turn” in contemporary literature’ (3), which, restricted to Christianity as it was in Tate’s formulation, also recalled the open, multifarious spirituality of Hassan and of McClure. Here, ‘encounters with the uncanny, the unexplained and, occasionally, the divine have slipped their generic boundaries and quietly crossed the threshold into the predictable world of everyday, mimetic realism’ (Tate 10).¹⁴ In the folklore-inflected fiction of the twenty-first century, this slipping of generic boundaries is enacted through the fantastic, and through the silence and sublimity surrounding the artwork in the novels. Florian Niedlich, too, sees a ‘religious turn’ in contemporary fiction, which is occurring:

in view of what is frequently seen as a very powerful contemporary resurgence of religion that seems to negate the validity of the secularisation thesis, in view of an increasing questioning and deconstruction of the established opposition between the secular and the religious itself. (Niedlich 212)

He claims this ‘religious turn’ is specific to twenty-first-century fiction, and examines the ‘wide range of religious, spiritual and mythical references’ (220) in John Burnside’s fiction. Focusing on Burnside’s earlier novel *Glisten* (2008), Niedlich shows how, alongside mimetic realism, Burnside makes use of the sublime and a form of Romanticism in order to make sacred, or to resacralize. The derelict chemical plant at the heart of the novel becomes ‘a sacred place, for which, accordingly, [the protagonist] feels “reverence”’ (Niedlich 219).

It is this form of the sacred – one which is not connected with organised,

¹⁴ Tate seems unaware of the debate surrounding the death of postmodernism; the ‘yearning for faith in the postmodern era’ (16) which he sees in the fiction of the early 2000s echoes McClure’s ‘reaching’ of the previous decade. This could be an oversight, but it could also point to the post-secular as a reaction against postmodernism, and therefore a feature of the literature appearing after it.

mainstream religion, but which takes account of the variety and uncertainty of post-secular spirituality – which I see at play in the folklore-inflected fiction under discussion. While religion is the main association of the word, the OED offers more suggestive definitions as well. Something sacred is ‘dedicated, set apart, exclusively appropriated to some person or some special purpose’ and ‘regarded with or entitled to respect or reverence similar to that which attaches to holy things’ (‘sacred’, *OED*). To describe these novels as resacralizing, then, is to describe how the sincere ‘space for the mystery’ (Burnside, *Summer* 328) created in each one is sustained by the fantastic use of folklore, and structured like the ‘momentary checking’ of Kant’s sublime. This is what these texts do, in place of demythologizing; their resacralizing use of the sublime is what holds together the other disparate shifts I have charted above. As well as moving from magic to the fantastic, away from explicit political subversion and into sincerity, the folklore-inflected fiction of the twenty-first-century evokes the negative pleasure of the sublime, the passive form of wonder rather than its active and activist double.

These moves are not discrete; each is bound up in the other. For Daston and Park, while today wonder is ‘that which is excluded by modern views of the rational, the credible, and the tasteful’ (15), medieval and early modern wonders constituted ‘a distinct ontological category, the preternatural, suspended between the mundane and the miraculous’ (14). As in the fantastic mode, ‘wonder as a passion registered the line between the known and the unknown’ (Daston and Park 13). This preoccupation with the unknown haunts contemporary folklore-inflected novels, which stage it, point it out, and create a space for it in the antinomy of the fantastic. Huber notes that ‘[t]he turn towards the fantastic continues to be triggered by the presence of the unnameable [...], manifest as central moments of irretrievable absence or loss’ (Huber 65). In the novels of Ness, Burnside, and Ivey, this loss is made literal in the form of a folklore-inspired woman who may or may not be able to return magically in the future. All three enact ‘a form of reaching’ not only towards these characters but also towards the unknowable they come to represent, a yearning which cannot be fulfilled. There is no object to this ‘reaching’, no thing – a god; the void – in the gap at the end of linguistic representation. As Irmtraud Huber says of other contemporary fiction: ‘[t]o find the Holy Grail, the

one and only meaning, is ultimately not necessary. Indeed, it might not even exist at all. What is important, however, is to always keep looking for it' (206).

Implications

Ethically ever after?

This resacralizing is much more politically substantial than it may initially appear. While a stance of passive enrapturement and reverence can, and often is, enabling of problematic hegemonies, the ‘reactionary’ politics Brooks and Toth warn of have never been a necessary condition of sublimity, sincerity, or the fantastic. For example, Jason Marc Harris sees the fantastic use of folklore in Victorian literature as essential to a project of social justice, as folklore is used to ‘present voices and perspectives of unofficial culture: imaginative, political, and spiritual claims that contradict the mindset of rational, religious, and imperial power’ (34). His argument is reminiscent of Rosemary Jackson’s claim for the fantastic, in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, as subversive by nature.¹⁵ In the twenty-first century, Jane Bennett, too, associates what she calls enchantment with ethical living, and it is her argument for enchantment which best describes what I see as the ethical implications of the novels under discussion.

‘To be enchanted,’ Bennett writes, ‘is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday’ (4). As the supernatural disrupts the rational in the fantastic, as Kant’s sublime causes a temporary stoppage, enchantment here is a break in one’s everyday life: ‘[t]o be enchanted, then, is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter’ (Bennett 5). The nature of this stoppage is as doubled as Warner’s description of wonder, as ‘[c]ontained within this surprised state are (1) a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter and (2) a more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one’s default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition’ (Bennett 5). Like Kant’s sublime, and like the definitions of the sacred which do not attach it to a mainstream religious tradition, enchantment has been described as ‘a way of carving out, within the fully profane world, a set of spaces which somehow possess the allure of the sacred’ (Landy

¹⁵ Jackson uses the terms fantasy and fantastic interchangeably.

and Saler 2).¹⁶

It is the momentary nature of Bennett's enchantment which is most important here. She claims to 'pursue a life with moments of enchantment rather than an enchanted way of life' (10), occasional brief encounters with enchantment rather than enchantment as a constant state. This is because the choice to lead an 'enchanted life' has often attracted the same charges of political disengagement as the novels I have discussed. Enchantment can 'temporarily [eclipse] the anxiety endemic to critical awareness of the world's often tragic complexity' (Bennett 10). Because of this, Bennett writes, for many commentators:

[t]he face of social justice has an eyebrow cocked in disbelief, a nose poised to sniff out power, or eyes crinkled with satirical laughter. For them, the quest for enchantment is always suspect, for it signals only a longing to forget about injustice, sink into naivete, and escape from politics. (9-10)

Such thinkers see enchantment as a 'luxury' afforded only to the privileged and complacent, while 'real people must cope with the real world' (10), but Bennett sees enchantment as imperative for ethical living. '[I]n small, controlled doses, a certain forgetfulness is ethically indispensable' (10) because 'the will to social justice' is in fact 'sustained by periodic bouts of being enamored of existence' (12), of being enchanted. This is because, 'to some small but irreducible extent, one must be enamored with existence and occasionally even enchanted in the face of it in order to be capable of donating some of one's scarce mortal resources to the service of others' (Bennett 4). It is by encountering such moments of enchanted pause, of sublime checking or fantastic hesitation, that one can continue to act ethically and usefully in the world. Enchantment, in Bennett's formulation, acts as an energising 'shot in the arm' (6); it is not a turn away from the impulse towards social justice, but an ethical choice in its favour.

This ethical enchantment is what I see as the function and effect of the work of Ivey, Ness, and Burnside. Critics are beginning to explore such ethics in relation to

¹⁶ Landy and Saler are writing about *re*-enchantment, while for Bennett, enchantment is a way to '[call] attention to the magical sites already here', sites which are magical 'in the sense of cultural practices that mark "the marvellous erupting amid the everyday"' (Bennett 8); there is no return, no 're-', in her formulation.

Burnside's work in particular; his 'ecologically aware art' (Griem 105) is almost always written about in terms of its 'ecocritical significance' (Hildyard 4).¹⁷ Writing about *Glisters*, Emily Horton sees 'the recurrent textual emphasis on the incomprehensible and therefore self-transcendent element in nature [as] providing a creative groundwork for a revised, neo-Romantic contemporary environmentalism' (76). Just as, for Bennett, the impulse towards ethical living is sustained by enchantment, the environmentalism Horton sees in Burnside's work is produced by 'the Romantic aesthetic of the sublime', which acts as 'a prompt towards environmental awareness' (73). In *A Summer of Drowning*, Liv's response to her otherworldly encounter is to begin creating art, but she considers herself 'not an artist, like Mother', but a 'map-maker'. In creating her maps or artworks, she is attempting to map and thus pay 'the right kind of attention' (Neidlich 220) to the natural world around her; this attention is engendered by the sublime, fantastic enchantment she has experienced in dealing with Maia/the huldra. In *A Summer of Drowning*, then, '[t]he sense of humility, wonder, and awe that the sublime produces [...] is in itself an indispensable eco-critical asset' (Horton 75).

Such ethical enchantments are not only staged in the novels, leading to an ethical turn in the characters' relationships with the natural world (*A Summer of Drowning*, *The Snow Child*) and each other (*The Snow Child*, *The Crane Wife*); they are also enacted by the novels themselves. If 'moments [of enchantment] can be cultivated and intensified by artful means' (Bennett 10), then the novels themselves can be seen to function as Bennett's enchantment-driven 'shot in the arm', sustaining the impulse towards ethical living. 'Enchantment is something that we encounter, that hits us, but it is also a comportment that can be fostered through deliberate strategies' (Bennett 4); one such strategy is an engagement with literature in the form I have described. To read a novel is to pause in your daily life for a moment; if that novel is a sublime encounter with the fantastic it can generate and encourage reverence for both the natural and the human worlds in its readers. As George finds after his love-story with Kumiko ends, these novels leave their readers 'ready to speak [...] of astonishment and wonder' (Ness 305); ready,

¹⁷ Tom Bristow gives an extended analysis of how Burnside's fiction and poetry relates to ecocritical concerns, while David James and Julika Griem in different ways explore Burnside's focus on his natural settings.

that is, to engage once again with the world. Having read novels such as these is to have found 'one of those special corners of what's real, one of those moments [...] where the world dwindled down to almost no one, where it seemed to pause just for him, so that he could, for a moment, be seized into life' (Ness 11).

Part II

Depths, a novel

bealtuinn
bealtainn
beltane

The boat rocked gently as it set off, out into the bay under the light summer-evening sky. The party-goers on board hardly noticed its movement; they were too wrapped up in each other and in Iain's return to look around them. But as the town shrank behind them and the hazy islands came closer they began to shout to each other, their voices drowning out the quiet smacking of the waves against the boat's side as they chattered and laughed about the view, the light. They even took pictures of the sea, trying to capture its blue endlessness in their little cameras.

These people saw only the surface. A little deeper down, the ocean was full of creatures, drawn to the sounds and ripples of the boat from the rocky, coastal shallows and from the dark open sea further out. When the boat became still, anchored in place at the edge of the bay, these animals came closer. They moved around the boat, darting or lumbering, checking for food and watching for danger. Finding nothing of interest,

most of them moved on. The mackerel remained, flitting over and under each other, a slithering mass just below the surface. They played around the keel like it was just another piece of flotsam. A few even darted in and out of the propellers, occasionally coming so close that their silvery backs flashed and flickered in the moonlight. Idiots. They were going to be breakfast tomorrow when these people awoke and the crew needed something to fry for them. The mackerel should have gone down, down, to hide in the depths where it was safe, but they did not leave. They continued their games, caught up in their little stories of survival, eating and mating and dying. They seemed happy in their oblivion.

There were larger spectators as well: hulking shapes with keen eyes and sharp teeth whose tail flicks sent the tiny fish scattering. These creatures were happy to wait, if it meant a tastier meal. They hid in the darkness, only a ripple of water giving away their position. Some did not even hunt. Instead, they seduced their prey. They sang, and drew you to them; they cried, and with a single teardrop you were caught, like a greenish hoof in a tangled braid, caught and trapped. An easy meal.

Of course, the people on the boat knew nothing of this. The sun set, slowly, and the blue gloaming it left behind became a deeper dark. They became boisterous, then, drinking and dancing and flirting with each other under the lights. They had forgotten that there was anything out there in the night. It was easy to see why: there were so many lights, little balls of brilliant fire, strung up around the railings and high on the walls, keeping out the night. And their loud, pulsing music kept out the crash of the waves. The melodies hid behind percussive beats and noise, but like all music it was seductive. So was the woman in red: Fay. She was dancing in the centre of a knot of men, accepting the drinks they brought her and giving out smiles as favours. She was their alpha, the one with the power: she kept the men around for as long as she wanted them, and then let them go. She rejected Donall early on. After that he stood by the drinks, trying not to watch her. Like everyone, he failed.

Fay danced with skill; she understood the music. But the mate she wanted, Iain, seemed uninterested. He went to get a drink; two drinks. Perhaps one was for Fay. As he threaded his way back through the group he grinned around at everybody, hardly

noticing as the drinks in his hands slopped over. The crowd parted for him like mackerel for a shark, and he headed straight for the women. Fay was dancing with the one in blue. She had a good name, an old name: Dianaimh. Unfortunately these people truncated it to Dia. She was strange, this one: despite being in the centre of the group she was not interested in the men. She stood and swayed, barely dancing, but when Iain returned her gaze became more focused. They were kin, these two, and he handed her one of the drinks he had fetched. After a moment of laughter-studded conversation he handed the other drink to Fay. She looked triumphant.

These people took so long over their games. They moved around one another carefully, never admitting when they were predator or prey, but it was no different to the ocean, where the creatures openly hunted and tried to mate.

The noise swelled: Dianaimh was going to bed, embracing her friend and her brother before pulling away from the group. Her loose blue dress detached from the mass of colour in a bright swirl before turning murky as she left the light and disappeared down the stairs. The rest stayed, dancing, drinking, playing their games. Donall watched Fay; Fay stared after Iain. Iain moved away, to get another drink for himself, but now he paused. He leaned on the railings, looking out at the dark, deep sea; perhaps he was searching for something. He was very close to the edge.

What was that, in the shadows?

1: sinking

Dia woke as the boat rocked on the morning tide. For a moment she clung to the wall, falling; then she remembered where she was and why the world was tilting. Iain was back. Her bold younger brother was moving back up north: of course he'd begun by throwing a party and hiring a boat. Dia wondered where he was now, if he'd slept at all.

Fay was curled up with a blanket on the other bunk, still sleeping, but sunlight was seeping under the door, turning the dark tan of the floor into gold. Dia took out her earplugs and pulled on some clothes, clambering over a mess of bags and shoes and out into the morning. Up on deck the wind hit her, cold and refreshing. It was still early, and the light was thin. She would paint later, after breakfast, she thought, looking out at the sea's pale glimmer. She couldn't see into the murky depths below.

No one else from the party was about. The deck where they'd been dancing was clean and clear: no signs of the raucous night before. Dia knew her brother was at his best at parties, when he could be public and gregarious, deftly moving between

conversations to manage the group. In private, at their parents' house where she still lived, he hadn't adjusted yet. He'd seemed a theatrical version of himself on his first night back: his gestures had been too large, his voice businesslike and unfamiliar. At dinner he had been eager to tell her and her parents about the local folklore, full of the seductive, dangerous creatures which were never what they seemed. People had believed in all that nonsense once, around here. He had told their parents how they could capitalise on the stories' pull at their B&B, and had been oblivious to Karen's lips pulling inwards and Craig's studied silence. Dia had wanted to intervene, to tell Iain to stop presuming he knew better than them how to run their business, but she, too, had stayed silent. He would settle in, Dia knew. It would just take time.

Dia had curled up on deck with pastries and tea by the time Fay emerged, wrapped in a blanket. She went over to the railing and hung her head.

'Can you stop the ocean?' she said, creating a pantomime out of her hangover. 'It's making me sick.'

'It'll not be because of the booze, will it?' Dia said.

Fay groaned, making Dia laugh, but she really was suffering. It was her own fault: she should have drunk more water, stocked up on more food, smoked instead of drinking so much. But while she expected the pain and the fuzziness of her habitual hangover, the nausea was way worse than usual. It was the boat, she thought, sinking to the floor; the boat's rocking made her nauseous. The railings felt cold against her back, even through the blanket, but they were secure. It wasn't like she was about to fall in. She closed her eyes and concentrated on not being sick.

'No one else is up, are they?' she asked, keeping her eyes closed. She heard Dia chuckle.

'I haven't seen Iain yet,' Dia said.

'It wasn't just him I was meaning.'

'Aye, right.'

Fay looked over at her friend. She knew Dia didn't mind the prospect of her best friend and her brother getting together, although it was a little odd. It was just a shame it didn't seem to be actually happening, Fay thought. She still didn't know how Iain felt,

not really. He had gone off somewhere last night before she'd had a chance to get close to him. She closed her eyes against the frustrating uncertainty and leaned her head back on the railings. She'd be seeing him more often, now he was up here working in their home town. She wasn't too far away, in Glasgow. Maybe -

'I'll go see if he's up,' said Dia. 'You' – she passed Fay a glass of water – 'hydrate.'

Fay gave her friend a thumbs up and drank the water. She wouldn't worry about Iain this morning, she thought, not when she had to get herself on a train to go back to work. She tried to relax, willing the salt breeze to refresh her.

Dia went downstairs, into the gloom. People were starting to emerge from their cabins, zombified with sleep and hangovers. At Iain's cabin door she knocked. Silence. He was still asleep, she thought, trying the handle. The door opened (strange), but the cabin was empty.

She went back, asking people in the hallway and the dining area if they'd seen him. They just stared at her blankly and shrugged. Outside one of the bathrooms she heard retching sounds. She tapped on the door.

'Iain?'

There was a muffled reply. Dia shook her head. Her brother was returning to Scotland in style.

The door opened, and a flushed, bleary face blinked out at her. It was Donall. Not Iain.

'Oh,' she said, 'sorry.' She frowned at him, puzzled. (What if - ?)

'What's wrong?' Donall asked. 'What's happened?'

Fay's phone rang, startling her. The noise was piercing. She swiped to answer.

'Lo?'

'Fay, it's Nina.'

Her boss. She swallowed, trying to create moisture in her parched mouth.

'Oh hi,' she managed.

'Where are you?'

'Uh...I'm not on today, I swapped with Greg -'

‘Then where’s he?’

‘What? Did he not show? But I said to you, I’m not in Glasgow this weekend, I’m on doubles next week to make it up, and -’

‘That doesn’t help me when there’s no one here on tables, does it?’

Fay knuckled her forehead. She had booked this weekend off, she’d arranged it to make sure she could be here for Iain – she was sure she had. But Nina was angry, and her attempts to sound reasonable were loud against Fay’s headache. She turned the volume down on her phone and watched people emerge from below. She rolled her eyes as she saw Donall come up the stairs and start talking to a crew member. Poor stolid Donall, she thought, with his straight policeman’s posture. He always looked so tense. She’d thought it was just around her, because he was so into her, but even now he seemed worried. Obviously he was like that with everyone.

‘You can’t just keep swapping your shifts,’ Nina said in her ear, but Dia emerged behind Donall and Fay straightened her spine, trying to look bright. Iain would be up, now, he’d see her, and -

But Iain didn’t appear. Dia was on the phone; that was weird. She wasn’t even listening to it. She was looking around as if she was trying to find something on deck. Donall was talking to more crew members who’d appeared; one of them looked important. Dia was over at the railings now, looking over and down at the shifting sea. It sparkled in the sun.

With a lurch in her stomach, Fay realised. They were still looking for Iain.

Her phone clattered to the floor. She hauled herself up and went over, head birling, swallowing hard against her nausea. ‘Dia,’ she said, pulling at her friend’s shoulder, tugging her round and away from the sea. Her face was pale and staring. ‘Dia, what -’

‘They’re going to check the crew cabins,’ Donall said, appearing beside them. ‘They’ll find him.’

Fay rounded on him, unable to phrase her questions. She was surprised to see him intelligent and, beneath his calm words, troubled. They both turned to Dia. She was pulling at her hair, grabbing strands and twisting them tightly.

‘He *never* turns his phone off,’ she was saying.

‘It’s probably just out of battery,’ said Donall.

‘Is he not just...with someone else?’ Fay asked, her voice weak.

‘They checked,’ Dia said, twisting her fingers in her hair. ‘They checked and he’s not...’

Fay swallowed, trying to control the churning in her stomach, as a crew member approached.

‘I’m afraid we can’t find him on board,’ he said.

Fay felt her nausea rise and turned away. This couldn’t be happening. But the crew member kept talking. Fay heard words like search and rescue and she choked, coughing. Bile rose in her throat and she vomited out over the side of the boat. The liquid seemed to take a long time to reach the water, but then there was hardly a splash before it sank and disappeared.

‘It’ll be fine,’ Donall heard himself saying. The others stared at him, and he wished he could recant. Dia’s white face was so like Iain’s; Fay he could barely look at. ‘I mean...’

‘Fuck *off*, Donall,’ said Fay.

He forced himself to look into her scornful face. ‘Look, they’ll find him,’ he tried. A helicopter began to buzz overhead. Search and rescue were working fast.

‘No,’ Dia said, looking up at it. Her voice was loud and grating. ‘No, no...’

‘It’s okay, Dia,’ Fay said. ‘It’s okay, he’ll be here.’ She turned to him directly. ‘Could he not have got to shore?’

‘The lifeboats are still here. It’s too far to, uh, swim.’ He saw her flinch at the thought, and wished he could put his arms around her for comfort.

‘Where - ?’ Dia waved her hands out towards the ocean. ‘Where else could he be?’

Donall couldn’t find the words. Dia was already panicking, her voice rising with every syllable. The others who’d come up for breakfast were glancing curiously over at them. Keep everyone calm, the crew had said, while they checked everywhere on board again. There was no need to panic; the helicopter was just a precaution. Iain was probably sleeping it off in a corner. But every corner had been checked. Donall shivered.

He couldn't remember when he'd last seen his friend.

'Take care of Dia,' he murmured to Fay. 'I'm going to go keep the peace with the others.' He was gratified when she simply nodded, eyes wide. It felt, briefly, like they had a connection.

Donall turned to the rest of the group. Some were eating happily, others nursing coffee and headaches. It all seemed so normal. How could Iain not be there? How could he just disappear, after he'd returned? They would find him, Donall thought, as he moved through the oblivious people and tried to return people's grins.

'Everything alright with Dia?' Andrew asked. They'd been at school together.

'Aye, she's fine.' Donall moved away before Andrew could read his face.

'Look at this!' said Beth, one of the group from Iain's university, nudging her friend.

'Oh no, that's awful. You've *got* to delete it.'

'Absolutely not,' said Beth, laughing. She held her phone up high, out of grabbing reach.

Donall froze. The police would need every single photograph, to reconstruct the night. He felt himself choking on the thought, the thought he couldn't have yet, but he had to do his job. Iain would know what to do here, how to stop them deleting the photos without causing alarm. He was always the one with the bluster, the words. Donall took a breath.

'Let's see,' he said, trying to grin as he looked over the women's shoulders. 'Nah, you look great. And are you not going to keep them for Iain? He wants all the photos, even the shite ones. He's going to do some kind of big montage or something.'

'Not with that picture!'

'See?' Beth. 'I've *got* to keep it, for Iain.'

Donall walked away. He wondered if his lie would take, if it would even help. Alone at the breakfast buffet he felt a lump in his throat. He wasn't taking this in. His friend might be – drowned. Donall shut his eyes and tried to pray.

He heard raised voices, and turned to see the crew assembling in the doorway. The announcement was coming. He went out into the cold morning to be of what use

he could.

Dia heard them speaking but couldn't take in the words. They were moving towards her, slowly, their white shirts too bright, too clean. She tried to rush towards them but Fay held her back.

'Let them make their announcement first,' she said.

But Dia needed to know, needed to hear how long it would be til they found him. Slowly, one of them came over. Dia couldn't get the words right, she was speaking but wasn't saying the right things. (Stupid.) She kept trying to get him to tell her when her little brother would be coming back but he wouldn't give her any answers. His pale face just frowned at her, the lines on his forehead darker, like shadows.

'Do you know what's happened?' she heard Fay say.

'Not yet, I'm afraid. We're heading straight back in. The police will take over from there.'

It was as if they couldn't hear her. There was a keening sound getting in the way, and below that, the noise of the waves. They were coming closer now, coming up to engulf her. Was this what had happened to her brother? She closed her mouth, her eyes, to keep out the waves, and the keening noise stopped. Now there was nothing but water. Its gloom was pricked with weird, pale lights. It dragged her down, claiming her.

After Dia fainted, the others started to panic. Donall had known this would happen. Iain's friends were from cities and wealth, and weren't that resilient. He tried to help. He circulated, handing out tea and water, confirming what he knew and making meaningless noises that he hoped were reassuring. The boat lumbered back towards the shore.

As they disembarked the police were waiting. Donall watched his colleagues work, collecting phones and taking statements. They wouldn't meet his eye, and only acknowledged him briefly, with pity. He realised he was angry. He wanted to work. In any other case he would've been in the helicopter that was still circling the bay, watching the waves. This time, of course, he couldn't. He wondered what they were telling Karen

and Craig, Iain and Dia's parents. He knew the statistics, and he could read the faces of the officers on deck. If Iain had gone in the water last night, if he had been drunk, if he hadn't already been found on shore, then he might not be coming back. Despite the spring warmth in the air, the water was cold. Donall couldn't stop his mind from working through the calculation: Iain would have had, at most, four hours.

Donall squeezed the bridge of his nose, keeping the tears at bay. Now wasn't the time. He looked automatically around for Fay, but she was on the phone again. He imagined himself going to her, putting a hand on her warm back, and feeling her melt into his chest. It wouldn't happen; it would never happen. And Dia was being seen to by a first aider. There was no one else he wanted to talk to. The party had been full of people he didn't know: Iain's friends from university, and a few people Donall remembered from school. He looked around at their hungover faces, full of shock, and realised that they didn't understand. They still believed the platitudes, and thought it would all be okay.

Dia came to on solid ground, sunlight in her eyes. It was quiet. Where had the water gone, the greenish darkness? There was a first aider next to her, smiling, telling her to relax, not to worry. She'd only fainted. She closed her eyes for a moment, content to obey.

Then she remembered.

'No,' she said, sitting up abruptly and feeling the blood rush from her head. 'No. My brother, I -'

'The police are searching,' the first aider said. 'You just rest, right?'

'No,' said Dia again, 'no!' She looked around for someone else, someone who could help. There was no one there.

The officers questioned them all, but Fay didn't want to go over it. She'd been obvious about what she wanted, sure of her own power, and she'd flirted outrageously with Iain. She cringed to remember how she'd leaned on the two-year age gap to play the sexual older woman, how she hadn't taken his polite hints. Really, she'd been drunk, and later

on a little high. She felt tears leaking out of her eyes as she realised she couldn't help.

'I'm sorry,' she said to the officer. 'I just don't remember. I was way too drunk, and -'

'It's okay,' the woman said. 'Is there anything you do recall? Out of context even, just the odd memory?'

Fay tried to remember. She'd spilt vodka on her new red dress; later on she'd slipped, and almost fallen into the railings. There was nothing about Iain. She hadn't seen him after he'd brought Dia that drink, and she'd cajoled him into giving her the cocktail he'd got for himself. He'd gone off to get another, and – that was it.

'I'm sorry,' she said again. 'I should be able to help.'

'It's not your fault,' said the officer. 'Could you just give us your contact details, in case we have any more questions?'

Fay recited her address dutifully. 'Do you know when I'll get my phone back?'

The officer shrugged. 'Shouldn't be too long.'

Fay walked away. She realised she had missed her train back to Glasgow. She would miss her shift that evening, too. She should have been panicking about that, since she needed the money while her acting work got settled, but she found that she didn't care.

Donall watched Fay leave, and knew he was losing her again.

'Hi, Don.'

He turned. It was Glen they'd sent to talk to him, one of the veterans. Donall hated being called Don, but even now he let it slide.

'Any news?' he said.

The old man shook his head.

'I just need a statement. Timeline of last night. You know.'

'Aye.' He took a breath. Concise, accurate, truthful: that was what they needed. Donall tried to focus. 'I was drunk,' he said bluntly. He shouldn't have been. He rarely let himself lose control, but Iain was so persuasive. His excitement at being back and his determination to make it a good night had been infectious. Donall had found it easy to

let go, to drink along with him.

‘Everyone has nights like that,’ Glen said. ‘Dinna worry.’

No, thought Donall. Not nights like this.

‘I remember seeing him just before midnight. He got drinks for Dia and Fay. I checked my phone just after that, at eleven fifty-six, I’m pretty sure. Then -’ Donall paused. ‘Then I stopped watching because he was flirting with Fay.’

‘Fay Duncan?’

‘Aye.’ He paused. He needed to keep his answers relevant. ‘Dia went to bed not long after that. I’m not sure when, sorry. I went downstairs at about one-thirty myself. I don’t remember talking to Iain in between, but’ – he shrugged, helpless – ‘that doesn’t mean I didn’t.’

‘What did you do immediately after checking your phone, at midnight?’

Donall knew the technique. Get them to visualise it and go step by step.

‘I got another drink. Beer. I hung around the bar for a bit, I don’t know how long for. Then I went back out on deck. I vaguely remember dancing, but not clearly. Then I got some water, to mitigate the effects, you know? And then I went downstairs, crashed out.’

‘Do you remember hearing splashes at any point?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘And I doubt anyone would. The music was pretty loud.’

‘And – you know I’ve got to ask – how was he, before?’

The old man was being honest. Donall should have appreciated that.

‘No, he was fine,’ he managed to say. ‘He was the life of the party. Like always.’

Glen nodded. ‘Drunk?’

‘Aye,’ said Donall. ‘But not – not out of control.’

Glen looked down at his notebook and frowned.

‘And everyone else? Happy to see him?’

‘Aye. Look, Glen, tell me what they’re thinking. There’s no chance, is there, that he could still be...’ He couldn’t finish the sentence.

Glen hesitated, glancing around. Then he sighed. ‘Look, as far as I can tell, nobody’s seen him since midnight. And he didn’t come back to shore. We’ve checked

everywhere, but at any rate, he couldn't have, that late, drunk, in the cold water...' Glen shook his head. 'He's gone for sure, son. I'm sorry.'

Donall stared at nothing. He could still hear the waves, crashing and rolling in the bay.

2: aftermath

They had given Dia something to make her sleep, but she woke early the next morning anyway, frantic and sick. Today they would find him; today they would bring him home. It was too early for the police to have started, but she could, she would. In her living room she made notes. She wrote down people, timings, areas of the rented boat. She kept scattering the notes with a sleeve, a strand of hair. She shouldn't have started on paper. (Idiot.) She should write a program, a simulation of the boat on her computer, and then she could work it out. She just needed to piece it together, the puzzle of the party. Once she had pinned everything else down, there would only be one thing left: Iain. Then she could work out where he had been and (could she do it?) where he was now.

Someone was knocking (Iain?) and now, coming in. It was Fay, with a tray of food.

'Here, eat. Your folks say you didn't eat yesterday. C'mon,' Fay said.

‘I can eat later,’ Dia said. ‘I’ve almost got it all mapped; look, this is how it was, this is where you all were. I’m in bed down here, see, and you’re up here. But Iain – I haven’t got a note for him, because no one saw him after, like, midnight. It was midnight, wasn’t it, when you saw him last?’

Fay was stunned by her friend’s energy, and her ability to focus. She didn’t know what to say.

‘People often remember stuff later, you know? And it helps to visualise it, so think, after I went to bed, what happened then?’

Dia looked so hungry for her memories. Fay sighed. ‘Look, I didn’t see him after that. He went off to get himself another drink and, and that was it, right?’ She sniffed. Her phone started ringing, startling them both. Fay was guiltily glad of the interruption. ‘Sorry, it’s my boss...’ She wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes before answering.

‘And are you gracing us with your presence this morning?’ Nina began.

‘Nina, look, something’s happened -’

‘Oh aye, well, I’ll soon find someone else to take your place.’

Fay was relieved until she realised that Nina meant it permanently, not just for the morning’s shift.

‘Nina, I can’t. They’re looking for my, my friend, they think he’s drowned and -’

Nina wouldn’t listen. Fay had to promise she would be back the next day, at work for seven a.m. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to sound all right as she told her boss, ‘yes, fine, I can make that.’ She would have to get the train back this afternoon, regardless of whether the search had found anything. She slumped down onto the floor beside Dia.

‘So he was in the kitchen, not on deck?’ Dia said.

‘I don’t know, Dia, I didn’t see him!’ Fay could hear her voice rising, thick with tears. She was close to the edge, and she didn’t want to break. ‘Don’t,’ she said. ‘I just – can’t...’

‘We’ve got to figure it out,’ Dia said, but her voice was uncertain.

‘Fuck, I know,’ said Fay. ‘I know. But I can’t remember any more than what I told the police. I don’t want to go over and over it.’

'I'll help you remember,' said Dia.

Fay shook her head. There was a blank spot in her mind, as if Iain had taken her memories with him when he disappeared. She didn't want to tell her friend how much she'd drunk.

'But I've got to *know*,' Dia said.

'Dia.'

'There's this gap after midnight where everyone seems to think he was asleep, where no one missed him, you know? But -'

'Dia, I -'

'- if I can just pin down exactly where he was on either side of the gap then maybe -'

'*Dianaimh*.'

Fay knew it stung, to hear her proper name. Karen had taught her how to pronounce the bastardised Gaelic when they were little: *d'yaa-niv*. Fay had run around after her friend saying it over and over again until Dia had run off to hide from her on the beach. Her friend looked just as distraught now.

Donall arrived at work desperate to help. He knew the search was ongoing at sea and, as unlikely as it was, on land. There were all those photos to look through as well. That was his domain, and they would need an extra pair of eyes. But his boss Amy just scowled at him.

'Off home with you,' she said.

'But -'

'Home. Take the time. You can come back tomorrow, if you really want to. But you're entitled to -'

'I want to work,' he said.

'You know I can't put you on this.'

Her eyes were compassionate, but he knew she wouldn't back down. 'I'll be in tomorrow,' he said.

He left the station and walked out into the rain, inevitably turning towards his

church. The spire drew attention to itself, straight and stark above the swaying green of the surrounding trees. He went into the sanctuary, letting the heavy door fall shut behind him. Inside, he breathed in the smell of the place: musty but clean. To Donall it always smelt of prayer.

He sat in a pew near the front and bowed his head. It wasn't prayer as he usually spoke it, just pleading: *bring him back, please, bring him back*. Donall sat up, disgusted at himself. This wasn't how his God worked, or how prayer worked. He stared at the stained glass windows. The figures looked so calm and unbothered. He knew he should find the same peace here, but he couldn't still his desperation.

Turning, he looked up at the most modern window in the back wall of the church. It was a circle, a swirl of colour and form. It looked chaotic, almost messy: it was Creation, the whole world made new. Usually Donall preferred the traditional images, but today it was exactly right. The blues and greens looked like a whirlpool.

'Donall.' A firm hand pressed down on his shoulder. It was his minister, John. Donall bowed his head and found himself crying. John's sonorous voice began to pray, and Donall focused on the sound, hoping it would help, if only for a moment.

Karen appeared at the door of Dia's living room, her face drawn and pinched.

'Come through,' she said. 'The police are here.'

Fay thought, so soon? She followed them through from Dia's flat to the main house. Then she hesitated, knowing it wasn't her place to follow the family in. She couldn't read Karen's expression, but when she said, 'I'll just wait in the hall,' Dia's mother seemed relieved.

Fay sat on the stairs, wishing she had her phone to distract her, and tried not to listen. She heard the door open and leapt up, but it was the front door, and the person coming in was only Donall. She remained standing, not sure what she could say.

Before they could speak, before Donall had to think of the right thing to say, they heard shouting. Dia's voice, then Craig's. Donall balled his fists. They were telling the family that they hadn't found anything. That must be it. Dia came barrelling out of the room, shaking with false certainty, and Donall caught her, held her.

‘They’ve stopped the search,’ she said. ‘Even though technically “the investigation remains open,” I could see it on his face – they’ve actually given up!’

‘I’m so sorry, Dia,’ Donall said. He tried and failed not to speak in platitudes. ‘They’ve done everything they can.’

‘How can they have when they haven’t brought him back!’

Donall couldn’t find the words. He looked mutely at Fay.

Fay watched him comfort their friend, stoic as always. Dia wasn’t listening.

‘Dia, here,’ Fay said, ‘they can’t bring him back.’

Donall was relieved when Fay joined him, putting a hand on Dia’s back and trying to calm her. ‘They tried, Dia,’ he said. ‘I know they tried their best.’ It was a meaningless phrase, and he winced at it. But Fay gave him a brief nod.

‘Aye,’ she said. ‘They tried, Dia. They want him back as well.’ Her voice was cracking.

Donall wanted to hold Fay, too, but Dia was peeling away from him, sinking onto the stairs, and Fay was with her, murmuring more appropriate, successful phrases, doing the right thing. He hadn’t known she could be so sensible. He ached for their brief, awful closeness to return, and to last.

He turned away. There was nothing he could do – again. He picked up a tourist leaflet that had fallen off the table and straightened the display. As if it made a difference. He remembered the same pamphlets from when he’d been a kid, when he and Iain had raced through here knocking everything over on their way down to the beach or up to the woods. There had been ornaments, too, like the one in the centre of the table. It was a tall horse statue with a fish-tail. A kelpie, it was called, a pagan water-horse that could change its shape. It seduced you like the devil and then drowned you, or ate you. Donall shuddered. Should he move the ornament, he wondered, to avoid the Machlins making that link? But it was probably just a piece of old tat to them. He ran his hand down it. There was a knobbled break around its neck, a dark uneven line where someone had glued it carefully back together. Maybe it wasn’t just junk – maybe it had meaning to someone. It was one of the things he and Iain had broken, Donall remembered, but he didn’t know when or why. He couldn’t remember the story on his

own. Iain would remember, Donall thought; would have remembered. He realised that this was the first time he'd thought of his friend in the past tense.

'Donall.' It was Fay. 'Donall, I have to go. I've got a train, and' – she grimaced – 'work won't let me have any more time. Will you...?' She gestured towards Dia.

'Aye, 'course,' he said. He took Dia's elbow and stood silently by as Fay hugged her goodbye. She went in to see Karen and Craig, returning tear-streaked after few moments.

'I wish I didn't have to leave,' she said, putting her arms around herself, and Donall almost reached out to hold her. Instead he only nodded in sympathy and turned away, taking Dia back to her parents.

Fay couldn't believe it was over. She knew he was gone, she wasn't delusional like Dia, but it still didn't quite feel real. She was back at the railway station like it was the end of any other visit to her home town. From the outside she probably looked fine: just another twenty-something, smoking too much and getting impatient. But Fay couldn't smoke enough to calm herself, inside. She wasn't sure how she would make herself go back to Glasgow and to work. She could imagine herself doing it, but it wasn't herself she saw, it was a doll, an automaton, going through the motions of being peppy and bright, serving the cafe's customers with a smile, throwing herself into rehearsals for *Macbeth*. It would all be an act: make-up to hide her face, cigarettes to calm her. Would it be enough? She thought of Larry, the MD guy, and wondered if that would help.

Her train was announced. Reluctantly she got on board. She'd never regretted leaving her home town before. It had seemed like moving up in the world when she'd first found a flat in Glasgow, where there was more going on, and the possibility of success. She had thought herself above this tiny washed-up town on the coast, with her theatrical skill and her ambition. Now, as she was pulled away from it on the train, the town seemed to claim her. For the first time, she felt like she belonged here, and now, she couldn't stay. She had to work, to pay the rent. She had to continue along the path she'd chosen; she couldn't stop or turn back. She was not so different to the character she'd be understudying, she realised, Lady Macbeth with her vaulting ambition, her

social grace, and her greed. It all seemed so petty now. Iain was gone, and no one knew why or how. Fay wanted answers as badly as Dia did. How had he fallen? Where had he fallen from? Why hadn't anyone seen him, when he was supposed to be the centre of attention? Nothing was finished here, nothing was explained.

Fay looked back, and the town was gone. The grey stone had given way to green. Even that was barely visible through the rain-smearred glass.

Dia wanted to struggle, to break down the facts and make them give up their secrets. She could do it. She did it all day with computers, sorting out their problems, and this wasn't any different. (Was it?) But everyone was being so *calm*. People came over to her parents' house, not just Donall but neighbours, other friends. They gave her tea with too much sugar, and later on soup and casserole. They said useless things like, this is just terrible. Dia didn't need to hear that. She knew he'd be back. She just needed to work out how, and how long it would be. These people were all asking questions – how had he fallen? Wasn't Iain good with boats? – but they were the wrong ones. Dia told them she needed to sleep, and escaped back to her own flat at the side of the house. She just wanted to work out what had happened.

Donall watched Dia leave, knowing she hadn't accepted the truth. She would need more time – or the stark proof of a body. Donall didn't want to think about that. After Dia was gone an elderly lady Donall recognised from church leant forward to say, 'well, you know they'd been drinking,' and that made Donall, too, leave the house. In the street he ground his teeth. How could she think it was somehow Iain's fault? How could she lay that on the Machlins? Maybe the alcohol was to blame, but the rest of them had been just as drunk, as if they were still teenagers, and none of them had fallen. Donall strode towards home in the wet half-light, not allowing himself to think anything other than 'fallen'. He wanted to be doing something to help, something real.

But there was nothing he could do tonight. He sat at his laptop, the screen bright in the gloom, and clicked through his social media to try to find a distraction. His Facebook was already cluttered with posts about Iain. Donall clicked away, sickened. He closed his eyes to pray, but he was too restless. He didn't feel clean or calm. He knew

some people reached out to God as a kind of cleansing, but he couldn't do it. He needed to have already cleansed himself, his mind and his temper, before he could pray.

Tonight he wouldn't manage that. He fidgeted guiltily before he gave in, once more, and opened a private browsing tab. The usual porn sites came up and he picked his the one he always chose, with the black letters BDSM emblazoned in the title. He clicked through the images and videos and felt himself relax slightly. On screen, giggles turned into moans of pain and pleasure, and he clicked and clicked and watched as women tugged at their restraints and squirmed in latex and chains. He let the images of cunts and mouths, open and eager, wash over him. There weren't cleansing, but they numbed him for a while.

It was a relief to get in to work the next day. Donall read over the report, taking in the statements, the photos, and the gaps in the evidence. The pictures were what told the story. Iain was centre stage for most of the night, or at least caught in the background. They'd tracked him around the deck, dancing, drinking. And then after midnight, he just wasn't there. Admittedly, the photos were blurry, but the report picked out the last photo they'd found of him, just before midnight. It was one of Beth's pictures, of her and someone called Tom making daft faces. Behind them, looking out into the night, was Iain. He was facing the sea, it seemed, not the shore. The report concluded that his fall was likely due to 'misadventure'. There was nothing to suggest anything else, anything worse. Donall understood why they had stopped searching. Iain had been dead long before any of them had woken up – before any of them had missed him.

Amy came by with some meaningless paperwork. Donall thanked her, and meant it. He got stuck in to the filing and sorting, the phone calls and queries. He liked the focus it gave him. Absorbed, he only looked up when he heard a commotion in the corridor. A group was gathering. Something must have happened. Donall was out of the door before he thought, maybe it's Iain.

He heard the words, 'on the beach', and felt cold. Glen elbowed the woman speaking when he caught sight of Donall, and the group fell silent.

'Tell me,' said Donall. He could hardly breathe. The others exchanged looks.

‘It’s no Iain,’ said Glen, and Donall exhaled.

‘What happened?’

Amy arrived then, and the group began to disperse. She noticed Donall, still waiting for an answer. He could tell she was deliberating, considering whether or not to tell him.

‘There’s a woman’s body on the beach,’ she said finally. ‘Washed up by the tide.’ Donall swallowed. ‘It isn’t him, I’m afraid.’

Donall tried not to make a sound, not to sob, or let go.

‘Look,’ Amy went on, ‘I wasn’t going to ask you to come out, but -’

‘I’ll come,’ he said. He needed something to do, something which might have answers.

At the beach, Donall moved quickly. He set up his equipment, gauging the effects of the wind and the sand and the light under the grey sky. It was soothing to focus on the mechanics, the variables, the things he could control.

When he finally got to look, the body was not just dead, it was mangled. Donall hadn’t expected so much desecration. A leg was bent the wrong way like an action figure’s, with dirty white bone sticking out, and a bloody, sand-encrusted hand was flung out to the side. There was seaweed behind it, dark and twisted. No, not seaweed – hair. It was thick and black, tangled with salt and sand. Donall paused, for a moment, and bowed his head. He had been too eager to see this, but now it sickened him. This wasn’t a person, not any more. This would be what Iain looked like, wherever he was.

Donall tried to see past the horror of the dead woman. He needed to do his job. Lifting his camera, he focused on the details, the colours, the minutiae of it all. There were black and purple bruises, greenish swellings, and so much red. Some was bright, but most had darkened to a deeper crimson, or mixed with the lighter sand. The blackest blood formed a striking contrast with the white bone and creamy skin. Donall photographed the head, the long, bright gash across the temple and the strip of dark green seaweed beside it. He caught the white flash of teeth through the half-open mouth and, beyond it, a deeper red. He lingered, knowing his desire for artistry was

inappropriate here. It was just the job, he told himself. Mostly it was number plates and mug shots; he couldn't help it if sometimes it was lurid and obscene and unexpectedly gorgeous.

Flicking back through his pictures to see what more he needed, his first few shots surprised him. The body was crumpled on the sand – all of it, a whole woman, not just the parts Donall had noticed. The camera always saw more than he did. Curled on its side, the body lay with one arm and that rope of hair flung out behind the head. And it was naked. He hadn't realised. He'd been sure the body had been dressed in something black. He zoomed in, just to check, and realised it was seaweed. The black ropes of it encircled the body, merging in places with its injuries, coiling around exposed bone, insinuating itself under a flap of broken skin.

Donall noticed something bright by the outstretched hand. It was probably nothing, but he tore himself away from the images to document it anyway. It was a silver disc with a design on it, too large and thin for a coin. After photographing it where it lay he picked it up, trying to gently brush the sand and seaweed from it. The seaweed caught, and as he tugged at it he realised it was a leather cord, tied securely to the disc. The loose ends were twisted and curled like they had once been knotted together: it was a necklace. The waves must have loosened the knot, untied it like fingers from around the woman's neck. Donall's spine felt cold. The delicacy, the precision of it disturbed him much more than the swollen, battered feet or bloodied face of the body.

Donall put the necklace in a bag, and lifted his camera again. He only needed a few more images: close-ups of the extremities. He began with the outstretched hand, and focused the camera. For a moment the movement of the lens made it look like the hand was twitching. Donall shuddered. He'd heard the stories, of bodies making noises or even movements long after death. It was something to do with the decomposition process. He took three pictures, then flicked back through them. There was that effect again, of movement between the shots; he must have shifted slightly. He shouldn't be making mistakes like that, not after so many years. He thought of Iain, of his easy competence at everything he attempted. Tearing his thoughts away from his friend, Donall looked down at the outstretched hand with his naked eyes. He needed to check

his angle.

The blood-stained fingers moved. They curled in, grasping at the sand, then let it go. Donall started, trying to move backwards, away. The broken wrist shifted. She was alive.

Donall must have cried out. Police officers surged past him towards the body as it started to convulse. She, not it. Not any more. Her back arched and shook, and she gave a weak scream, like a horse's. Her hand was still opening and closing, trying to grasp something that wasn't there. Her fingers were bent at impossible angles, the knuckles white with strain. As they carried her to the ambulance Donall heard her coughing. Even when she passed out again her breathing kept coming, ragged and laboured, like she was choking on the air. It sounded as if she didn't know how to breathe.

Donall wondered how long she'd been underwater – how long a person could survive.

3: awakening

Everything was bright. Just a pure, bright numbness beyond definition. And then, ruptures – little slits like windows – dirty, greyish patches making the rest look white. They moved, sometimes, as if a shadow was passing through. Sounds began as distant whirs, then crashed, roaring, like waves.

‘What is your name?’

And then, nothing. Nothing but a faint sense of relief, to be back in the bright, calm nothingness, after the roar and rush of the grey world.

But the world never disappeared for long. It had shape now, contours. Some of its shapes could be identified, others simply classified. The world had pain in it, too, sharp, fierce, all-consuming. The pain had no locus, no origin. It simply was. Everything, in the grey world, was pain, just as everything, in the white world, was bright. The bright numbness – that seemed better.

‘What is your name?’

The pain began to move, now nearer, now further away. Slowly, it took over. Even in the white, the glorious floating numbness, there was now a hint of pain. She felt her body. It felt like the first time she had had a body. Suddenly she had something to move with in the world, something through which to act. It shifted with hurt, want, discomfort. Sometimes it was hot, stifled and burning; then it would be cold, desperate, shaky. The pain began to diversify, too. There were slow-burning aches which lingered, but through which she could think; there were sharp throbbing spasms that were over quickly, each one a blot of nothingness in her mind. There were fiery itching pains which sometimes, inexplicably, cooled, only to return fiercer and uncontrollable; there were hard, breath-taking pangs which seemed strong enough to dissolve everything she had ever been.

She longed for the whiteness, for numbing oblivion.

The woman haunted Donall as much as Iain did. At least this time he was involved, and filling in the report took his mind off his friend. He began with the basics. Date of incident. Time of incident. Name of officer in charge. Then he stopped. How could he describe it? He couldn't find the words. The dead body convulsing beside him, the thing in the sand becoming, in an instant, a person...it defied his powers of description.

While he was hesitating, his phone rang. The man at the front desk said it was Ms. Machlin. Dia. Donall grimaced. She must have heard about the body, the woman, already. She'd be wanting to check it wasn't Iain, to connect it, somehow, to her brother. The pain came back to him, like a punch to the gut.

'Eh, can you put her off?' Donall asked down the phone. He had been managing to distract himself, to keep going, more or less. He couldn't lose that now.

'Aye, sure. You're busy, right? Away from your desk?'

Donall could hear the man grinning.

'Aye,' he said, 'thanks. I owe you.'

After he hung up he checked his mobile. Three missed calls from Dia. He cursed under his breath. He couldn't deal with her denial. He had to get his work done. But the empty box on the report form stared up at him. He clicked away. He looked

through the missing persons reports again instead, for something to procrastinate with. He filtered them by gender so he didn't have to see Iain. There were so many women who were missed, smiling in holiday pictures or serious in professional shots, and he wondered which one she'd turn out to be. There were too many for him to find her today. She'd wake up soon, and then they'd know.

Instead of going back to his report he clicked through the photographs from the scene. Even though he had already captioned them, filed them – scrupulous as always – there were already extra images in the system. They were pictures of the pendant he'd found. The lab had already started working on it. Donall zoomed in. The engraving was a horse's head, in profile. Its one eye gleamed, and its mane billowed in an imaginary wind. Donall could imagine it whinnying, cantering off across the fields, or diving into water.

He made himself close the image and turn back to his report. It was already late, and he needed to get it done.

The evenings were light at this time of year, and Donall usually liked his late, day-lit walks. But tonight he arrived home to a figure leaping out at him from the step. He started, before he recognised Dia. She grabbed his arm with taut fingers.

'Well?' she demanded.

Donall didn't know what to say. He should have guessed this would happen.

'I heard...' Dia kept digging her fingers into his arm, although she couldn't finish her sentence.

'No,' he said. 'No, it wasn't him.'

She relaxed. Donall felt sick.

'Sure?'

'Aye,' said Donall. 'A woman. And alive.'

Dia sagged against the door frame, but she looked relieved. Donall knew he'd have to take her in. He didn't want to go over it all again, his failure to stop Iain's fall. But he had to give her some tea, some comfort. Dutiful Donall, he thought, as he opened the door. Just like fucking always.

Donall stood in the dim hall for a moment before turning on the light. He usually didn't bother for himself. He liked the darkness, the way everything in the house was laid out before him, exactly as he'd left it. In the dark only he knew where everything was. But he turned on the light for Dia.

In the kitchen she sat down, shedding scarves and the bundle of layers she always wore, even in early summer. She looked thin without them.

'Stay for tea?' Donall said.

'Aye.' She sounded far away.

Donall put some soup on the hob. They didn't speak until he had ladled it into bowls, but Donall was glad of the silence. Dia's energy scared him. Now all her fire seemed to have gone out. She was barely eating, just picking apart her bread and drowning it in her soup. Donall understood, in a way. It had been like that when his mum had died, a long time ago now. He'd lost a lot of weight. It wasn't good for you, grief. Donall finished his own soup cautiously, and mopped up all the dregs with his bread. He knew it made him seem too precise, too finicky, but he couldn't help it.

'Are you going to tell me about her?' Dia said eventually.

'You know I can't give you the details. Never have. It's the job.'

'She's not local?'

Donall sighed.

'I didn't recognise her. But -'

'She's *alive*, Donall.' She stared at him, eager. She had Iain's prominent cheekbones, but her eyes were wider, wilder. 'Do you realise what that means? Iain went in around midnight, three days ago now, and if she -'

'Dia,' Donall said, struggling to raise his voice over her stream of words. 'Dia, don't.'

'Jesus Christ, Donall, why the hell not!'

Donall flinched.

'Because...' He hated this. 'We've gone over it all. And the police know their stuff. It's been too long. That woman could have gone in this morning, all we know. No point wishing, or -'

‘How can you fucking say that!’

The clock on the wall seemed to be ticking louder than usual. Donall wished there was something he could say, something that would stop Dia looking so shocked and hurt. He closed his eyes, but didn’t know how to find the strength. When he opened them again she was crying. Her big hands covered her face and gripped her hair, but he could see her shoulders shaking and hear her quiet sobs. It startled him. He went over, gave her tissues, and rubbed her elbow awkwardly.

‘It’s all right, here, Dia. Dia, it’s all right.’

‘No it’s fucking *no!*’ she shouted.

Donall stopped rubbing. She was right. It was awful, it wasn’t all right. But he didn’t know what else to say. Iain would have managed this. He always knew how to intervene. Donall had always missed him most at times like this, when he needed words, and grace. Now, though, he wasn’t just far away: he was gone.

Dia’s hair was getting in her unfinished soup. Donall moved the bowl away and she put her head on the table. He went to the sink to wash his own bowl. He kept his back turned longer than he needed to, to give her some space. Outside, in the blue twilight, it started to rain.

‘Do you really think he just fell?’ Dia asked after a while. Her voice was low. Donall turned. She was sniffing, not looking up. Donall sat back down across from her.

‘Aye,’ he said, ‘I do.’ His voice sounded firm. He didn’t want her to ask again, to make him think of the other options.

‘But -’

‘No,’ said Donall. His voice was loud, aggressive. He didn’t know how to make her understand. He wanted her gone, wanted to be alone with his own grief. That was all he could handle. He thought about the things he’d find online, after she left, the images that would help him unwind. It wouldn’t be enough this time, he realised.

‘It wasn’t his fault,’ he said aloud. ‘It wasn’t anyone’s fault, it just happened. He probably – he was probably just looking out at the sea. Didn’t realise how close to the edge he was.’

‘But nobody *saw* him,’ Dia said uncertainly.

‘It’s nobody’s fault,’ Donall said again.

‘You said that, right. I know. It’s just...’ Dia’s face was hidden between the curtains of her hair again. ‘I was in bed, I’d put fucking earplugs in so I wouldn’t hear the party, but someone -’

She looked up at Donall, pleading. Tears fell from her creased eyes and her shoulders shook, but she didn’t sob. She didn’t make a sound.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘Someone should’ve seen him, should’ve...’ He couldn’t make himself say it: someone should’ve stopped him. ‘I was just so, well, I was at the bar the whole time, basically.’ He couldn’t meet Dia’s eyes. She wiped her face on a tissue and seemed calmer.

‘Because Fay was all over him,’ Dia said.

Donall grimaced. ‘I didn’t want to watch,’ he said. It was pathetic. It had always been pathetic, how he felt about Fay. She’d always scorned him, like the town he’d chosen to stay in. But she’d come back for the party, because Iain had asked. And in that bright red dress, she’d looked gorgeous. That was why he’d missed what happened, why he hadn’t been able to help: his useless obsession.

‘You know Fay didn’t see him either,’ Dia was saying. ‘When he disappeared at midnight she assumed he’d given her the brush off, so she went back to flirting with everybody else.’

Donall winced. *Almost* everybody else, he thought.

Dia was still talking, listing people she’d spoken to, what they’d seen, what they’d remembered. It was becoming a litany. Names, times, anecdotal evidence. Nothing concrete; nothing definite.

‘Dia,’ Donall said gently, ‘the police have -’

‘I *know*,’ she said. ‘But it might help. Someone might remember something after the fact, something no one else had seen, and then we’d know -’

‘Dia, this isn’t a cop show,’ Donall said, exasperated. He wished he could retract that awful American phrase, but she wouldn’t stop rehashing it like this. She was just making it harder to accept that he was gone.

‘Ach, I’m sorry, Dia,’ he said. ‘I just...’ He threw his hands out, helpless.

She didn't stay long, after that. Donall watched her leave, unable to help. This could tear them all apart, he realised; this could change everything. He wondered how he'd managed not to think of that before.

In the hospital, the woman was being remade. It felt like birth: a reshaping of whatever she had been before. She did not know if there had been a before. If so, it – she – had been levelled. Now her body was re-making itself, from scratch, and like a building it began inside. Bits of bone were pressed into each other, scaffolded with metal and plaster. Organs were made to function with tubes and bags before being stitched back together and taught to work on their own. They faltered at first, stuttering to a halt and having to be re-started. Lungs were pushed open and shut, open and shut. Slowly they learned, they adapted, and she breathed unaided. Her own body filtered the air she swam in, and enriched the blood that quickened her. Her heart fired up, pumping and thumping at a steady, stately pace, a little faster each day, a little stronger and more capable. Gradually, the healing moved outwards. Her eyes opened, blinking in the light; her lips began to move, her tongue started to taste and thirst.

'What is your name?'

She understood the questions, but her answers did not fit. There was no word which attached to her, no sound which meant only her. She could not give them what they wanted, and she did not understand why they wanted it.

'When were you born?'

She probed into her mind. It ached and throbbed and pulsed behind her eyes, controlling everything that happened in this strange new body. She searched it like an animal looking for food, turning over every rock and branch, checking every hiding place in the thick of reeds and corals. She uncovered secrets, curiosities, but not enough. Never enough. She kept hoping to find something more, a hidden pearl in a closed-up shell, a buried treasure deep in the sand which would hold more data, more knowledge, more memories. She would find them. She had to find them.

'When were you born?'

She opened her eyes to the dull whiteness of the hospital room. She remembered

another whiteness, a purer, cleaner kind, somewhere tranquil and calm. She could not remember it for long. She had been taken from it, torn out of somewhere she felt safe. And now -

‘When were you born?’

She turned to the voice, the quiet, unassuming voice which asked questions, again and again, and opened her mouth. When she spoke the sound rumbled in her chest, rasped in her throat, and emerged like a child’s, weak, low, ill-fitting.

‘Now.’

Dia knew the others had given up on him; they’d taken the grief counselling she’d refused. But she wouldn’t capitulate. She was keeping count. One week, two; soon it had been a month. More and more people looked askance at her continued belief as the time passed. The police had been useless (like her, like all of them) – they just said he was gone, without any reason or proof, anything that made sense. They were focusing on this mystery woman from the beach, her bizarre amnesia and returning health.

Dia needed to calm her mind while she waited for Iain to return. She managed it sometimes at work, when she sank into a problem, untangling the glitches and making the computers work again. But it wasn’t enough. In her studio space beside the house she set up her easel, and the canvas loomed before her like a flag, like something she was supposed to believe in. She wasn’t going to start painting today. She would just mark up the canvas in preparation. She drew in pencil, sketching the image from memory. She’d never done that before, worked without a view, or a photograph, but now she had to. She had to hold it all in her head, the flick of hair, the chin, the precise curve of his mouth. Raising her pencil, she added a mark. She stood back and looked, and it wasn’t right. It wasn’t *him*. The smile was wrong. It wasn’t what she’d seen as he’d stepped out of the car, stretching and breathing the sea air -

The pencil trembled, and fell. Dia lurched forwards to catch it but she was too slow (like she’d been on the boat, too slow to realise, to see) and it crunched beneath her foot. (Useless.) She knelt to look at the mess. The shards were variegated, the pale tan of the wood hiding something darker inside. But the slender graphite, the heart of the

thing, had crumbled. Dia felt her eyes filling, and let herself weep. It was almost a relief to let the sobs wrack her body and blear her eyes.

The tears ebbed. Dia sniffed heavily, and swallowed. She grabbed the easel and turned it, scraping it across the floor, all but toppling it over, until it faced the wall. There. Her failure was hidden. She had thought she could do it, from memory, but she couldn't. She didn't know him well enough, the lines of his face and the colours of his skin. She couldn't recapture her brother, make him appear on the canvas. She should have been able to remember – there was no reason why she couldn't recall his features perfectly. (She just wasn't good enough.)

She breathed, wiping away fresh tears, and then she left. As she closed the studio door she glanced behind her, as if there might be someone there (someone she hadn't pushed away), but the room was empty. There was no one in the house, either. On the kitchen table was a photograph, printed from the internet, ready to be filed away, large and glossy. It had that curve she had failed to capture, that smile of his. Dia reached out to touch it, but her hand was wet with tears. A drop of water trembled on her fingertip and fell (idiot!) to splash the surface. For a moment it looked as if it had come from the drink he was holding, then it rolled up towards his face, distorting it, making it strange.

Dia blinked. The water. There was someone she could ask about that.

The woman ate and ate. She kept healing. Plaster moldings were removed and her limbs emerged, whole and new, to move weakly, uncertainly. One by one she shed her swaddling bandages, and her limbs grew strong. They took her to a room where she could run on a machine. She ran, going nowhere, staring out at the sky.

'Catch,' said a doctor. The ball came at her hard, fast. She was not expecting it, had not thought about where it would go. But when the thing thwacked against her hand, her fingers curled to clutch it. She looked down, surprised. She had caught it. It had not been planned, or calculated, and yet the ball, which a moment ago she had seen leaving the doctor's hand, was now clasped in her own. She looked up. The doctor seemed pleased. They liked that she could catch.

'Stand on this,' said the doctor. It was a board that moved, wobbling under her

feet. It reminded her of something, something hidden away in the thick mud of her mind. She stood, letting the muscles in her legs tilt and twist and hold her. Again, the doctor smiled.

Even after this they wouldn't release her from the bed. They prodded and poked and probed her; they took blood, hair, skin, parts of her which they used for tests she did not understand. They asked her questions, doubled ones hiding a different kind of diagnosis or confinement under the surface. Even while she was eating, they came, springing new questions on her then. Her hunger had not subsided. She ate everything they gave her – she did not care what it was. She was always hungry. She could always eat. After a while they stopped indulging her, and she was restricted to three meals per day. Her hunger grew. The questions, too.

'What time is it?'

The light was warm, but thin.

'It is early – the morning. Nine?'

'Eight-thirty. Good. What day is it?'

She hesitated. It had been Tuesday, when they had made her catch things, tested her reflexes. She counted.

'Thursday.'

'What month is it?'

She stared at the window. When she had been running she had seen green. She had not seen enough of the outside to really know.

'Mid-summer,' she said. Solstice-time.

'June, yes. What year is it?'

This she did not know. She had not thought about it, had not planned for this question. It seemed unimportant, but the doctors seemed to care. She just wanted to be outside. She wanted it as much as the food she devoured. She asked, she even begged, her low, calm voice hiding the urgency of the request. Heads were shaken, expressions sprouting pity like scales, and she was kept indoors.

Donall wanted silence. He was spending more and more time away from work, at home

on his computer or at church. He didn't go to the sanctuary on Sundays, when it was full of people pitying him, or at the youth club where he usually volunteered – John had let him take a break from that. Instead he went in the evenings, alone. Then he could sit in a better darkness than the one he had created at home, a darkness that was truly empty. It had no internet to tempt him, no people to make demands. He felt safe there, between the old stone walls, beneath the stained glass. Sometimes he sat in silence; sometimes he talked to God, or to Iain.

‘Do you remember when I came down to visit you at university?’ he said.

‘Aye,’ Iain replied, ‘you were so awkward. You didn't need to be, they all thought you were interesting. But you had a chip on your shoulder about being “just” a policeman.’

But that wasn't what Iain had been like, not exactly. In their conversations now Iain was kinder, more accepting, less quick to bite back at you if he thought you were wrong or stupid. The real Iain, the imperfect one, was fading. Donall saw it happen with a slow panic, unable to stop it, unable to hold on to what had been true.

He kept going, however. Kept working. At his desk he still trawled the missing persons' database, trying to find the woman from the beach. He hadn't expected her to be so completely amnesiac. It was becoming futile, this search, as ritualised a part of his day as the porn he watched at home. He idly changed the search parameters, moving the age, appearance, date of disappearance, to see if that would make a difference.

‘Donall – you busy?’

It was Amy. He shrugged.

‘Run to the hospital, would you, with the camera? They think the woman's finally fit for a headshot. Might be able to identify her through the database. If not, we'll put it in the papers.’

Donall's pulse throbbed in his neck.

‘Shouldn't take you long,’ said Amy. ‘You can give her that necklace thing, too – the lab are done with it. The forms and that are downstairs.’ She sounded expectant.

‘Right,’ Donall said. ‘I'll go now.’

‘Great,’ said Amy, already moving on. ‘Thanks.’

Donall sat still for a moment, staring at nothing. He'd been seeing the same faces in the missing persons database again and again, but he'd had nothing to compare them to until now. He was finally going to find out what the woman from the beach really looked like. The thought sent a shiver through him, and he wondered if it was anticipation or fear. She had barely been a person, stretched out on the sand, naked and grasping. She would be healing now, getting back the movement in her arms and legs, and regaining her strength.

As he picked up the necklace he held it up to the light. Its silver was visible, but it wasn't shining through the plastic. He remembered how it had glinted, seductive in the sand – how the woman's hands had grasped towards it. He felt a vague apprehension at giving the thing back to her. But they couldn't have missed anything while they worked on it, and besides, it might be her only possession.

Driving to the hospital, he tried to calm his racing heartbeat. He was nervous, as if he was going for an interview, or to see Fay. He wondered what the woman was going to think of him. He didn't know if they'd told her he was the one who'd realised she was alive. He felt a brief, undeserved glow of pride, before the reality of it came back to him. They'd wasted minutes, thinking she was dead. Like they'd wasted hours, not knowing Iain was gone. Donall squeezed his hands into fists. He was nearly there. He had to control himself. Focus on the woman.

He had to show his ID twice before he got to her. Donall fumbled with it, blushing and feeling like a fraud. They let him through, but Donall stopped the nurse before he pulled back the curtain. He wasn't ready to see her.

'How is she?' he asked in an undertone.

'Healing fast,' the nurse said. 'She's a fighter.'

'And will you release her? When she's better?'

'Of course,' he said.

'But...the amnesia,' Donall said, lamely.

The nurse's grin was wry.

'I don't think we could keep her here if we tried,' he said.

Donall looked up at him, alarmed, but the man was still cheerful.

‘How long?’ Donall asked.

‘Anyone else? I’d say another three weeks at least. But this one...’ He shrugged. ‘She might be out by the end of the week.’ He pulled away the curtain and Donall saw her. It felt like the first time. She still looked battered, covered in cuts and bandages, and Donall had to blink to stop himself seeing the seaweed, the sand, the wreck she’d been by the sea. Even though her legs were covered by a blanket, all Donall saw was the memory of that white shard of bone. He wondered what they’d had to do, to get it back into her leg, how they’d put her back together. He looked up at her face, but he didn’t recognise her from the missing persons pictures. She had dark, intelligent eyes, which watched him watching her, curious but not annoyed. She didn’t seem wary, or distrustful, or any of the other things Donall had expected. She seemed thoughtful, as if her mind was working on something far away; she even seemed content, like everything was going according to plan.

Donall explained briefly what he was there for. His voice felt weak and uncertain and he fought to sound more professional. The woman nodded, and as he put a pen in her hand their fingers brushed together. Donall started. He hadn’t expected her to be so warm. He still thought of her as a creature of the sea, cold-blooded and mysterious, but she was just a woman.

‘How should I - ?’

‘Oh,’ said Donall, flustered. Her voice was lower than he’d expected, deep and mellow, almost sexy. ‘Sorry,’ he said. He hadn’t thought. Of course she couldn’t sign her name. ‘Uh, just put an X, I guess,’ he said, hoping that was right.

The woman nodded, and slowly made her mark. Donall signed to say that the X was definitely hers, that he had given her the necklace. As she took it in her hands, she smiled. Her fingers looked delicate, long and slender, but they pressed down hard on the silver disc. She was strong, Donall realised.

‘I’ll just set up my camera,’ he muttered. He was glad to move to the end of the bed, to put the camera between himself and her intelligent, smiling stare. As he adjusted the tripod, his fingers brushed the button, and he took a picture. She looked up at him when she heard the shutter click.

‘Sorry,’ he said, ‘just testing the light. He looked back at his accidental picture, frowning in pretend concentration. The mystery woman’s eyes were bright, and she looked animated, curious. Donall knew he wouldn’t get another picture where she seemed this natural. He didn’t delete it.

‘Right,’ said Donall. He looked straight at her. The woman stared back, a smile in her eyes. For a second she looked mocking. Then she spoke.

‘Am I all right?’ she said, shifting slightly on the bed. Her thin hospital gown clung to her breasts. Donall wondered if they, too, were cut or grazed, marked by the violence of the sea. He looked away, blushing.

‘Uh, that’s fine,’ he said, swallowing hard. He babbled out the usual spiel: don’t smile, relax your face, be natural. ‘That way they’ll know you,’ he added. He took a few pictures, then looked back through them to check he’d got one that would work for the press. He was almost disappointed to have finished the job so quickly. He wanted to keep watching, to see if he could figure her out. But there was nothing else to do. The woman was staring into space. Her fingers were still running over and over the necklace, but she hadn’t put it on.

‘You remember it,’ Donall found himself asking, ‘the necklace?’

She considered for a moment.

‘No,’ she said at last. ‘But’ – she smiled – ‘I like it.’

As Donall turned to leave he felt a shiver run down his spine. Her fingers had run over the silver the same way they’d grasped the empty sand.

People began to visit the woman. More doctors and experts, a stream of people wanting to probe into her mind. They asked more and more questions, studying her with undisguised excitement. A staring policeman came with a camera and a necklace. Curious, she took the necklace and kept it beside her, and she looked into the man’s camera as it flashed and flashed. She waited calmly, patiently, until they all went away. A woman with flighty hair came, too. The nurses said she wanted to draw pictures with her, to see if that would stir up the mud in her mind and uncover some of its secrets. This time, she said no. She had not liked the previous intruders. They stared, as if she

were on display. It made her feel caged. Anger burned inside her like molten rock.

She was still allowed to run, facing the sky, but she never moved on. She ran faster, harder. Angry, hungry, she grew strong, stronger than they expected. They began to frown when they saw her. She knew they wanted her to be gone, but they did not think she was sufficiently healed. Her molten core bubbled hotly. She breathed, cooling it, letting it simmer and prepare. She paced the small room. As she stalked past the table she saw, again, the necklace. Her necklace, they had told her. Alone, she picked it up. The horse's head gleamed in the light. Something shimmered in her mind. She noticed, but did not try to chase it. She was becoming an adept hunter of memories. She had to stay still, silent and unwatching. She had to let them approach, let them relax into her presence. When they were close enough, comfortable enough to sniff her hand, she would pounce.

She untangled the cord, slowly pulling at it until it came loose. She bent her head to put it on, tied a knot, then another. She straightened. It was heavy and cold on her collarbone. Something stirred in her mind, darting into sight and then back into the shadows. The memories were close. She paused, fixing her prey, waiting for her moment. She would catch them. She would open the doors and walls and hidden places in her mind, and she would know everything. She held back, she waited – not yet.

It would be one motion, fluid and swift.

Not yet.

She would dart, pounce. She would catch and devour.

Now.

4: stories

Fay stared at her face in the mirror. She couldn't remember the last time she'd looked happy. It would have been weeks ago. Every day of the two months since Iain had disappeared seemed to show in her features. Now she was home from the cafe and she could stop making an effort she only saw the dry patches, the dark circles, the dullness of her skin. She should moisturise, take care of herself, but right now she had to go over her lines. *Macbeth* opened soon. She was only the understudy, but she still had to be prepared. Straightening her shoulders, she tried to find the Lady in her features: the intelligence, the calculation, the joy of power. It wasn't there. Her face remained her own, slack and sad. She couldn't summon up the Lady's strength. Turning away from the mirror, she tried again, this time squaring her shoulders and snaking her hips as she strode across her room. She had a letter to read out, full of ambition, but as she held it up she could only see her own hands, trembling. It was the same trembling which had made her drop the coffee cup at work earlier. The porcelain had smashed on the floor,

startling the customers. It hardly mattered, breaking a single cup; the dishwashers did it all the time. But Fay was surprised at herself. She was usually much more in control.

She closed her eyes and focused. She filled her mind with ancient queens and pagan magic. She said the words out loud: 'Come, you spirits!' Her voice was low and strong. The words were a spell, a set of magic words; she was supposed to make a different kind of magic happen on stage. 'Come, you spirits, that tend on mortal thoughts -'

A ringing sound startled her: Skype. As she scrambled over to her computer it dawned on her that she had, for a moment, managed the transformation, that if she had looked in the mirror just then she might have seen, not herself, but Lady Macbeth, powerful and assured, smiling from behind her eyes.

But the moment was gone. Dia was calling. In her profile picture she was wide-eyed, and looked like she was trying not to laugh. Fay hadn't seen her like that since the boat party. She took a breath, wishing she didn't have to answer. She wasn't sure she had the energy for Dia's misery. It would only dredge up her own. God, that was harsh, she thought. And – she swallowed – maybe they'd found something.

'Is there news?' Fay asked, as Dia waved hello.

'No,' Dia said, 'nothing.'

There was a pause. Fay didn't know what to say. She didn't need to ask how Dia was.

'He was supposed to be *back*,' Dia said.

'I know, hon.' Fay felt herself doing the haunted, pitying look she hated so much. She smoothed the expression from her face and hoped Dia hadn't seen it.

'He'd just, like, accepted us all, the ones who didn't leave, you know? And the whole place – he was coming home, back to where he was from. And now he's disappeared it's like I'm still waiting, like he's still down south. It feels like he's still just about to arrive.'

'Dia, he's not coming back,' Fay said. The words felt strangled in her throat.

Dia recoiled like Fay had slapped her. 'How do you know!'

'Dia, hon, I miss him too. But – there's no chance. Not now. It's been weeks,

almost two months. And the water was cold -'

'No,' Dia said, 'no...'

She was crying. Fay didn't know what to do. She hated seeing her friend like this. But she couldn't let Dia keep pretending, keep on dreaming, when he wasn't going to come back. They didn't even know, really, what had happened to him. At least Dia knew that he loved her. Fay only had what-ifs and dreams.

'Dia, I'm sorry,' Fay said.

'I know,' Dia said, her tears subsiding. 'I know. But no one seems to be trying, no one seems to care!'

'We do care! We just don't, don't fantasise as much. Or we don't believe our fantasies. You think I don't want him back as -' Fay's voice cracked. She turned away, glancing desperately around for a cigarette. Her need flared up suddenly, like a cramp, but she only found an empty packet.

'God, I'm sorry,' Dia said. 'I shouldn't – I know you cared. I just...'

Fay found herself laughing.

'It's not like he returned the feeling,' she said. 'At least, not that he told me.'

'I bet he did,' Dia said. 'I bet he will, when he comes back.'

Fay shook her head gently.

'You know I actually thought I could move up there again, if he wanted me,' she said. She couldn't meet Dia's eyes. 'I thought, if he can hack it this far away from, from everything, maybe I can too. I would have done that, for him.'

There was a pause. Fay knew Dia was wincing; she hated the way Fay talked about their home town. But Fay didn't look up.

'Then you would have seen me more often, too,' Dia said.

Fay nodded. 'It was a lovely little dream world,' she said bitterly.

'You could still come back,' Dia said.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I've got *Macbeth* now. I might really get somewhere with that.'

She looked to her friend for congratulations, for support, but Dia didn't respond. She was staring off into space, fiddling with her hair. Fay couldn't think of anything else

to say.

Donall was still working on the mystery woman's identity. There were several possibilities, dark-haired women of about the right age, but the process of checking each of them out was slow. He sent off a description and the woman's photograph to several places: Dundee, Glasgow, the Borders. Maybe one of them would reply positively, and someone would get their missing friend back.

He went to church at night, in the evening daylight when he could be alone. He sat in the sanctuary and bowed his head.

'Iain, I'm sorry.'

'Don't worry about it, man,' his friend replied, muffled and far away. 'I'm fine, now.'

'But – I should have done something.'

'No,' Iain said, shaking his head. 'No. It's not your fault.'

The relief Donall felt was visceral, bodily, like a weight had been taken, for a moment, off his chest.

'I wish I knew what had happened,' he said.

'It doesn't matter now.'

Donall knew the phantom he was seeing wasn't real. At least, he didn't think it could be. He believed in an afterlife, in a further experience of the soul, but not, he thought, in ghosts. Not convenient ghosts who were comforting and cheerful. The weight settled back onto him, and Donall got up and left, angry and restless.

At home, Donall switched on his computer. If he couldn't relax in silence, in emptiness, maybe he could fill his mind and drive out how much he missed his friend. He began by searching out Fay. From the dark safety of his bedroom he scrutinised her Facebook page, examining each new picture, every update. He almost preferred seeing her online, inaccessible and gorgeous. In person she was too scornful, too quick and liable to laugh at him. Online, he could feel involved. Usually – before Iain – there had been dozens of pictures. Now there were only a few. One was a heavily filtered promo shot for the next show she was in. Donall frowned at it. Fay was off to the side, almost

unnoticed by the camera, not centre stage as she should have been. Here she still looked a little like the Lady she wanted to be, Donall thought, with those bright eyes, haughty and vulnerable. He clicked away. He didn't like seeing Fay become somebody else, but even in the pictures where she wasn't playing a character, she didn't seem herself. In the most recent one she was clubbing, holding a bright bottle as a man Donall didn't recognise clasped her close. Donall tried to zoom in, but couldn't, not enough. There was a wildness in her eyes. Donall couldn't tell if her pupils were large with drink or just caught in the flash. He followed the curve of her torso with his cursor. She looked so pliant, so available. And she was, Donall knew. To everyone but him.

Donall clicked away from Fay and her apparent joy. Instead, he opened a private browsing tab and typed in a few letters, clicking through his usual fare. It had become almost a ritual, with the guilt it provoked a dull constant in the background. Maybe it was the guilt winning out, but it wasn't working tonight. He wasn't able to relax. He knew he should turn away from the bodies, but he no longer had the strength. Instead he let himself fall deeper into the recesses of the internet, deeper into his own desires. The teasing bondage and flirtatious power play gave way to real pain. Finally, Donall felt the heat of pleasure, and he shifted in his seat. On screen, a woman moaned. She was slowly, titillatingly, sticking a needle through her skin and into the soft flesh of her breast, just above the ridge of a black corset. She moaned again, and to Donall it sounded almost like pleasure. She did it again and again, leaving a trail of red marks along her flesh. When the video ended Donall found another. There were images, too, and he clicked through them slowly, savouring each one just like his own photos. That thought led to the mystery woman, and he was jolted into sudden, shameful desire. He searched frantically for a video, something that was right. A woman screamed, flinching as she was beaten, red marks appearing on her pale skin. She whimpered, and begged, but the flogging continued. Donall watched and listened eagerly.

Afterwards he felt weak. He closed the browser window without looking again at what he'd just enjoyed. He threw himself on his bed, uncomfortable and unrelaxed. He was exhausted. He hoped he would sleep. The images came back to him in flashes, Iain and the mystery woman and the porn and Fay's Facebook pictures, all in a mix. There

was something about Fay's pictures, he thought, something wild and not right. He wondered how she was doing, really, if she was coping as well as she seemed. I should pray for her, he thought. That wildness in her eyes – he felt it, he knew it. It was the panic that kept him awake. He let himself imagine that she understood, that she felt the same panic he did. He even emailed her, typing a few lines on his phone and hitting send before he could think too much about it. Maybe this time she would respond, and they could be washed away by the wave of their wretchedness together. They could simply let it claim them, and take them out of the world.

As he started to fall asleep, he felt his breathing slow. It sounded loud in the silence, and he remembered the rasping breath of the broken woman. It sounded like the soft clatter of chains. In his dreams, she started to crawl up the beach, clawing her way closer, her broken fingers grasping.

Fay called Dia a few days later. She was going to make an effort this time. She would try to help her friend.

'Have you heard about this mystery woman on the beach they keep going on about?' Fay said. She and Dia could share their annoyance at it, how it belittled their bigger loss, without having to spell it out.

But Dia's face lit up at Fay's words. She leaned so far forward that Fay could only see her eyes, squarely framed by the screen.

'You know it was Donall who found her? Actually discovered she was alive. Dead creepy for him, but it's a miracle, isn't it? She was so close to, to death but she came back, she came back, Fay, I mean...' Dia paused, an awed expression on her face. 'She must have crazy memories, you know? Recent ones, I mean, not from before – she's a total amnesiac, can't remember a thing. Obviously Donall's trying to work out who she is from missing persons and that but it's so surreal, you know? She could be anyone, from anywhere...'

Fay couldn't believe the transformation in her friend. It was so unexpected, her fixation on this woman who'd come out of the sea. Dia was actually beaming. There was an odd light in her eyes, and her voice had suddenly become animated. It seemed

grotesque. Fay wished she'd found something else to talk about. Dia just wouldn't stop.

'...in the hospital, and they're doing all these tests, you know, but I don't think they've worked anything out, not really. I tried to go see her, but -'

'What?' Fay broke in to the flow of words. 'You – what?'

'I tried to go see her, to see what she knew, what she'd seen, you know?'

Fay shook her head.

'But she couldn't have visitors then,' Dia went on, 'so I'll try again, I think, with the photograph, just to find out, you know, if she'd seen him.'

'Seen...?'

Dia was nodding, a beautiful hopefulness spreading over her face. Fay felt a cold knot in her stomach.

'Seen Iain. You know, in the water.'

Fay couldn't speak. Slow, bloated images swam through her mind. She tried to shut them out. What Dia was thinking – it was an abomination. The word made her think briefly, derisively, of Donall and his religion, but it was right. What Dia was suggesting was shocking, wrong, and, of course, impossible. She swallowed, wondering what she could possibly say.

Dia must have seen the shock and disbelief on her face. 'It's not that crazy,' she said. 'I mean, she was found around the same time, and they think she'd been in the water for a while. She can't remember a thing, so I thought, maybe if she sees a picture or something she'd remember, she might have been on a boat or something, and -'

'Dia -' Fay didn't know where to start. The knot inside her felt like a pulsing weight. 'She wasn't on our boat,' she managed to say.

'I know that,' Dia said, 'but they could have been down there together afterwards, and she might know where -'

'No,' Fay heard herself say. 'No, Dia, it's not possible. It's just not possible.' Dia looked down, and Fay could only see her hair, a mess of blonde. She wondered if she could have misunderstood. Surely Dia had meant something more prosaic than an unearthly encounter underwater? But Dia wasn't contradicting her. Fay's carefully built up calm was starting to crumble. Dia looked back at her, her eyes pleading.

‘But don’t you see,’ Dia said, ‘she might, might know something...’

‘No, hon. She won’t.’

‘That’s what Donall said.’

Fay rolled her eyes in an attempt not to cry. She tried to change the subject, get Dia to come back to reality.

‘You know he’s been emailing me again,’ she said. Her voice felt unnatural.

‘Hmm?’ Dia’s voice was flat. She didn’t care.

‘Donall. He’s – well, you know. I didn’t reply, obviously.’ Fay could hear the scorn in her voice. It was like someone else was speaking through her, choosing her words. ‘It wasn’t too bad, you know, the usual stuff of wanting to be there for me and that, but, I mean, you know what’s behind it all.’ She wondered if Dia was going to object. It was odd that they were friends now; Donall had always been Iain’s friend.

‘He was just trying to be nice,’ Dia said vaguely. Fay wondered if she was listening, or if she was still thinking about the woman from the beach.

‘He’s *always* nice,’ said Fay, exaggerating her exasperation. ‘That’s his problem.’

Dia’s frown softened.

‘You two never change,’ she said. ‘Maybe you should reply for once, give him a shock.’

Fay laughed in relief, then stopped herself. It didn’t seem right, to be laughing, to be happy. But even Dia was grinning a little. Fay relaxed. It would be okay to leave her like this, she thought. She made up an excuse, and after she closed her laptop she slumped over it, her head in her hands. It wasn’t enough that Iain was gone, dead, drowned in the freezing sea, but now Dia was driving herself mad with hope as well. She tried to cry, to scream it all out, but she couldn’t. She was stopped up. She checked her phone, hoping someone had invited her out, so she could drink and dance and find some pills, and feel some better release.

Dia went to the hospital, despite Fay’s shock and disbelief. The first time, she’d lost her nerve, and let them send her away, but now, she would get through. Inside everything was pastel: pale azure, arsenic green, the shade of off-white they called dissent. She wove

her way through the corridors, moving quickly as if she knew exactly where to go. She turned back on herself (stupid) but eventually: there. The ward she'd been taken to when she'd offered her art therapy services. Before, there had been staff around to turn her away, but now Dia simply pushed open the heavy double door, and there she was. She was sitting up in bed, her hair bitter chocolate, her skin pale, a silver necklace at her throat, and she looked steadily at Dia.

Dia looked away from her bright, dark eyes. Now she was here, confronted by the woman in the flesh, she didn't know how to phrase her question.

'I'm Dia, Dianaimh,' she said. 'I came before, for the art, I mean, I tried to, but -'

The woman smiled. 'I remember,' she said in a low voice.

Dia tried to respond, but she couldn't quite lift her cheeks or brighten her eyes.

'I'm not here for that this time, though. I just, I -'

The woman just looked at her. Dia took a step forward, and hesitated.

'Sit,' the woman said.

Dia obeyed. She took out the photograph but she didn't show it to the woman, not yet. She stared at it herself, and tried to find the words. Tried not to think about it too much.

'I just wondered, I mean, it's probably...' She pushed a strand of hair behind her ears and breathed in, steeling herself for the question. 'Do you recognise him?' She turned the photograph to face the woman, scrutinising her face so as not to miss a single reaction. The woman looked, considering. She blinked twice, slowly, like a panther. She breathed in. Then:

'No.' Her low voice sounded final. Dia felt her head bowing, and tried to nod.

'Who is he?' asked the woman. She put her hand on Dia's, touching the photograph, running a finger along its edge and then across Dia's palm. Dia started at the touch. It was not unwelcome. 'Who is he to you?' The woman's voice sounded rough around the edges, as if she hadn't used it much.

'Brother,' Dia managed. It sounded croaky. She swallowed. 'He's my brother. He – he's missing.' She couldn't read the expression in the woman's eyes, didn't know if she was appalled by her hope. (Everyone was, everyone recoiled from her.) Dia couldn't stop

herself from talking. 'He's, he was...it's the sea,' she said. 'They think he drowned. We were on a boat, the night before you, uh...but he's out there, he *is*, and you – I thought...I just thought you might...I don't know.'

'I am sorry,' the woman said.

Dia nodded. Her eyes were filling, blurring her vision. She put the photograph back in her pocket, trying not to crumple it, hoping she hadn't ruined it further. The tears she'd dropped on his glossy face, her (clumsy) fingerprints, she was smearing him, making him indistinct. She swallowed, blinking back her tears. She didn't want to cry in front of this woman.

'I'll go,' Dia said. 'I should -'

'Wait.'

The woman looked like she might understand. Dia stayed.

'What is his name?'

She cared, this woman; she actually wanted to know. 'Iain,' Dia said, 'Iain Machlin.'

'And you are Dianaimh.'

Dia opened her mouth to say, call me Dia, everyone does, but she stopped. Her name, her full, unwieldy name, had sounded so natural on the strange woman's tongue. She could be Dianaimh to this nameless woman, she decided.

'Don't you want a name?' said Dia suddenly. Was that too forward? But the woman smiled again.

'I do,' she said. 'What would you call me?'

Dia thought about it, staring at the woman. What kind of name would fit her best? She didn't know anything about her. It should be something simple, usable, but at the same time there was something elegant about her, regal.

'Mary,' she said at last. A queen's name.

'Mary,' said the woman, trying it on. 'What does it mean?'

'Oh.' Dia frowned. 'I don't know. Here, I'll look it up.' She took out her phone. 'Right – Mary. Maria. It says wished-for or beloved; oh, and rebellious, bitter.' She hesitated. 'Maybe -'

‘Mary will do,’ said the woman.

‘What, are you actually going to use that?’ said Dia. ‘Don’t you want to choose something yourself?’

The woman shook her head. Her eyes were shining. Dia gazed into them, and felt, for a moment, calm.

‘I should go,’ she said, picking up her bag.

‘You may come again,’ the woman said, ‘if you like.’

The woman watched Dianaimh walk away, into the fresh air beyond the ward. She stayed behind, thinking and planning.

Mary, she thought. Rebellious. Yes.

What Dia had said on the phone haunted Fay. Even when she was out, swaying and bouncing and shouting along to music she was too high to understand, she felt an urgency, a loss. She quashed it, trying to ignore it; she even sought out Larry, the dealer, and bought more pills without even trying to haggle down the price. She could see he was surprised, but she just took them quickly and moved on. As her jaw tightened and she began to come up she tried to lose herself in seducing some man for the night. She accepted drinks she hadn’t watched being poured, drank from bottles she could barely see. She fucked sloppily, outside by the bins, scratching and pushing at a stranger until he hurt her in return and made her feel something.

But it wasn’t enough. As she dragged herself home in the sticky dawn, she knew she was wasting time. Dia was right: she wasn’t doing anything to find Iain – to find his body. There wasn’t much she could do, but she had to look into it. She had a couple of hours until her shift at the cafe, and she wouldn’t be sleeping anyway. In her flat she made coffee, filled a big glass with water, and began searching online. She trawled the internet for stories of disappearances, people taken by the sea. There were hundreds. Fay hadn’t realised. Accidental drownings, botched rescues, mysterious disappearances: they happened everywhere, all the time. Sometimes there was a body, sometimes not; often the body was found years later. It could take decades, even centuries. There was a

nineteenth-century wreck they were still investigating off the coast of the United States, the skeletons there only now being pulled up. Fay shivered. Was that any better than the people who were ‘missing presumed dead’ or ‘missing presumed drowned’? Such awful phrases. They left so much room for hope, for delusions like Dia’s.

Fay began to sober up as she read through news reports, statistical surveys, descriptions by the families. The drownings were mostly simple, everyday tragedies, but there was one which seemed to go deeper. *One drowns, another lives*, said the title. Fay thought of the mysterious woman in the hospital, and clicked the link. It was a story from Norway, about a woman, this time, who had disappeared, and a man who had been found half-dead during the search. The parallels thrummed in Fay’s mind. She scrolled through the story, reading the details of the man’s healing, and the efforts to find the woman. Then she sat back, scowling. The seemingly factual report had turned into folklore. The man was some kind of sea creature who preyed on humans; he could change shape, change gender, and seduce them. Fay clicked away angrily. She’d known these stories, once, when she’d been younger – the selkies, the kelpies, the *sidh*, all of that – but they were meaningless. They didn’t explain anything, not Iain’s death, not this woman Dia was so interested in, and how she had survived the waves.

Fay got up. She was starting to feel cold and shaky. She went to the bathroom and turned the shower on full, moving the temperature dial to its highest setting. Her housemates wouldn’t be up yet, so no one would know if she used all the hot water. She got in, tipping her hair back and letting the water sink into her hair. She closed her eyes. The daft stories were still in her head; they definitely had a pull. But she had enough dark magic in *Macbeth*. She wished the spirits the Lady summoned were real. Maybe they would come and wash away all the pain and the loss. Tap water wasn’t enough for that.

The woman had asked Dia to visit, but Dia still couldn’t be sure it she meant it. There had been a hint of vulnerability in the woman’s face; she was lost, Dia thought, and she didn’t know who or how to be. She would go, Dia decided, she would try to reach out to her. Perhaps she would feel the woman’s warm touch again, and tell her it would be

all right.

It was easy to find her, this time. Dia wasn't sure what to say.

'Hi,' she said, 'Mary.'

The woman smiled. 'Dianaimh,' she said. 'How are you?'

Her eyes were searching and earnest. Dia felt herself close to tears at the simple question. People usually didn't want to know.

'I – I am not very well,' she said. 'I can't, I can't focus, I can't sleep, I –' (Can't do anything right.)

'It is because of your grief.'

Unthinking, Dia nodded. Then she started. 'No, no, it isn't grief, it can't be...' But she felt something unclenching inside her. (A weakness, a relaxation – it would undo her.) She stared at the woman in horror.

'It will pass, in time,' the woman said. 'Life is long. You will change.'

'I don't want to,' Dia said. Her voice was small. The woman nodded slowly. Dia couldn't understand her. Why would she, of all people, she who had survived, try to tell her that it wasn't possible? (Maybe it was because of that, because she knew the sea. Maybe –) 'Have you changed?' Dia asked.

The woman looked at her sharply. Dia hadn't meant to ask this, hadn't meant to pry, but the words just came out. 'I mean, is there part of you that, that's stable, that's, like, really you? Something that's lasted – from before?'

This was not what the woman had expected from fearful Dianaimh. But now, as she looked at her anxious face, her sand-coloured hair, Dianaimh's want was obvious. She wanted that common human thing: a connection. She wanted to reach out, somehow, and touch someone else; to stop feeling broken all on her own. Mary understood. She was becoming accustomed to the new things about herself, like being called Mary. At the same time there *was* something, the molten core of her self, the hot, angry thing that kept her going. She could not show that to Dianaimh – to anyone. She had to find a story.

'There is something that is me, yes,' she said finally, 'but I do not know what it is. I – I have changed, also, I think.'

Dianaimh's face brightened with sympathy, and Mary was pleased. She had spoken well.

Dia felt calm, beside the woman – beside Mary. They were alike, in their confusion, their difficulty in simply being. Dia could relax with her, and sit silently. It was restful.

'May I ask you a question?' Mary said after a moment.

'Sure.'

'I am hoping to be released soon, but' – she paused – 'I have nowhere to go. Are there places, here, where I could stay? I do not have money, yet, or a job, but I will find one. Whatever is needed.'

Dia was touched. Mary seemed so eager, so earnest. Dia thought over the various hostels, hotels, and guest houses in the town, wondering which would be the most likely to let this woman work for her room. Then she realised.

'My parents,' she said. Mary raised her eyebrows. 'They own a bed and breakfast place, the Creagmuir. They might put you up. You could do chores in return, maybe, until you find something? If you don't mind a tiny room, there's a space in the attic, I think...I could ask them, if you want.'

Mary was still for a moment. Dia held her breath. Maybe she had misunderstood (as always). But then Mary smiled, a real, wide, gleaming smile, full of teeth and joy.

'That would be wonderful, Dianaimh,' she said.

Dia found it easy to return her cheerful look. Her face felt a little strange.

At work, Donall's phone rang. It was a Glasgow voice.

'I think we've ID-ed your mystery woman,' the man said. Donall sat up.

'Margaret McAskie, thirty-three. She lived alone, was reported missing by her landlord. Quite sad, actually – there's no family, no close friends we can find.'

'What about work?' Donall said.

'She was temping – something to do with IT. Her contract ended in April, and the colleagues she worked with don't seem to have been that close to her. Her landlord only reported her missing when she didn't pay the rent.'

‘But he definitely recognised her?’

‘Aye, well, he said he was pretty sure. Can’t think why he’d lie.’

‘True.’

‘I’ll send the report over, then, and close up on this end?’

‘Sure,’ said Donall. ‘Thanks.’

‘The landlord kept some of her things,’ the man went on. ‘I’ll send those up as well.’

Donall wondered what would arrive. What traces could this woman have left? In the meantime he scrutinised the reports. There was so little information: a name, an age, a national insurance number. She had no family, and there seemed to be no other photographs. There was only a landlord, who had met her a handful of times, to identify this woman. Amy was delighted, of course, and Donall knew he should be too. But these weren’t the answers he had been looking for. He might have identified the woman, but he hadn’t learned anything about her. She still seemed like a mystery.

Mary’s body grew stronger, healthier. Even her skin healed, stitching together all her disparate parts. It coated her like tar, pulling her together, gripping onto her and covering over her cuts, her scars, her broken parts. Finally, she was whole.

The staring policeman came back, with a box of objects and some papers. They had found her a name; another name. She pored over the objects: clothes, a pair of running shoes, a computer.

‘Is there anything here you remember?’ a doctor asked her.

‘No.’ They were just things; they had no meaning to her.

‘What about your name?’

Margaret McAskie, they had told her she was called. ‘I do not know,’ she replied. She did not mind McAskie, but Margaret sounded too weighty. It meant ‘pearl’, she learned, something precious and secret. That suited her. However, she remembered her visits with Dianaimh, the way she had let the flighty woman name her. She was becoming accustomed to ‘Mary’. Perhaps she could have two names, she thought.

For the moment she concentrated on being released. She stopped asking for extra

food. Instead she hid her hunger behind small, tight smiles, and waited. Even when they came for her blood, she forced herself to let them, to not struggle as they punctured her new skin. It took time. She watched the people who bustled around her, and, slowly, learned to copy.

‘I want you to think back,’ said the doctor. ‘What is the first thing you remember?’

Ripples, Mary thought, vibrations full of meaning; things she had found under the rocks in her mind. But that was not what these people wanted. She said, ‘I have these flashes,’ and the doctor leaned closer. ‘They may not be real, but...’ She closed her eyes, allowing herself time to find the right words. ‘It was dark, midnight dark, and I was scared...I couldn’t move, or only slowly. It was as if my limbs were stuck, somehow.’

‘Like you were in water, perhaps?’

‘Perhaps,’ she said. She creased her forehead in concentration before turning to face the doctor. ‘This may have been afterwards, however, on the beach. I – I cannot be sure. I do not think there is much more.’

‘Well, that’s a very good start,’ the doctor said, pleased.

The doctor did not come back. Instead they introduced her to a lanky, grinning social worker called Jamie. She simply smiled up at him and said it was nice to meet you. They all nodded, and consulted, and decided she was like them. Then, they let her out.

5: encounters

Fay's opening night came and went, and she waited in the understudy's dressing room. Each night she sat there on her phone, doing more research. She read about drownings, rescues, and miraculous recoveries. She even occasionally looked up the folklore. There was a whole system of creatures and magic that was part of this land she was from, she found. It was there, in the same place she was, but unreachable, untouchable by most people. The stories were full of the few who had reached it. They heard weird music as they were walking home drunk and followed it out of the world; sometimes they got lost and stumbled through a kind of gateway. Most of them never came back, or came back generations later, feeling like they'd only been gone for hours. It was lamented, this loss of time, and the faerie world's seduction was always dangerous, but to Fay it began to sound ideal. To lose time and awareness like that would be better than a drunken blackout, she thought, better than what she was doing now: the drinking, the pills, the sex. None of it was as effective as it had been. Even the men who often messaged her

didn't hold her attention. Still, if the guy was intelligent enough, or funny in just the right way, Fay could briefly pretend he was Iain.

On the fifth day of the run, the real Lady Macbeth was ill. She'd caught something from her child, and Fay had to take her place, perhaps for as long as a week. When the director phoned, Fay feigned sympathy, but she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror and Lady Macbeth was smiling at her, ambitious and ruthless. She didn't care about the other actor. Fay was glad she was sick, glad with a fierceness that frightened her. But she held on to that darkness as she prepared for the evening. She wondered if Iain would have come to see her, if he would have sat in the audience and watched her. What would he have thought?

On stage, she was in control. She watched her husband dither with his morality, weighing up ambition and murder. He decided he didn't want to kill his king, and Lady Macbeth was contemptuous. 'Art thou afeared,' she asked him, 'to be the same in thine own act and valour, as thou art in desire?' Lady Macbeth goaded her husband to murder.

As the play went on, Fay felt like the queen she played, presiding over a pagan festival, ready, it seemed, to take a sacrifice. At the interval the director complimented her work, but to Fay it seemed too soon to judge. Her final scene was coming up, and it was one of those awful iconic ones that everyone knew: the sleepwalking scene. She didn't show it, but she dreaded becoming the madwoman who had lost control, not because it was a challenge, but because it was easy. All she had to do was let go. And once she had, here, in public, beyond the safety of rehearsal, she didn't know if she would be able to return.

Fay got ready, in her white shift. She had never understood why it was traditionally white and innocent. It should have been black, she thought, or a bloody red. On stage, the lights were dimmed. Lady Macbeth appeared, weaving, hivering, unsteady, but Fay kept her creeping madness external. She scrubbed and washed her hands in the motions she'd practised. She gasped and moaned at rehearsed intervals and made her movements jerky. Concentrating on her appearance, she felt the scene begin to slip away from her. It was moving too quickly. Fay started speaking, her voice loud and

staccato and full of desperation, and she felt like she was watching herself from out there in the audience. She could see reviewers taking notes, and looked away. Lady Macbeth roamed the stage, chasing visions. Fay imagined each of the people she mentioned, the dead people who were sitting somewhere backstage, waiting to take their final bow. The king with his throat slit. The other Lady who'd been beaten to death. Banquo, ghostly and bloodied. Iain in deep water.

Fay stopped, and blinked. She'd been halfway through a line when Iain had come into her head. She saw him in her mind's eye, floating like they'd been swimming in the sea. The water was blue and green and dappled with shifting glimmers of light. Looking up through the water she thought she could see another person, outlined against the light.

The stage was silent. Fay opened her mouth and shut it again. She hadn't been counting seconds, but she knew she had time before the audience got uncomfortable. They would never know she'd faltered if she just got back into it. But she couldn't remember what she'd been saying. The lines of her madness were all so similar, they didn't have the driving rhythm and occasional rhyme of the rest of the play. She stole a miserable glance at the prompter. He made a knocking gesture. Fay didn't know what that meant. She felt cold and exposed in her shift. The prompter knocked again, and Fay could see people shifting in the shadows backstage. She knew everyone there would be holding their breath. It was a devastating failure. It seemed inevitable now, that she would fail. This plan of hers, this senseless, grand ambition, it would never have worked. She didn't know how she could ever have believed in it. The Lady's despair took her over, and she stood shaking, ready to give up, to walk offstage without a word. She was exhausted, by grief, by uncertainty, by failure. She wished she could go to bed. She didn't realise she'd said it aloud until it was done: 'to bed, to bed...' she'd murmured. Her shoulders slumped, and she rubbed her face. It was over.

Her head snapped up as she realised what she'd said. It was her line, the one she'd forgotten. And the prompter's knocking: that was what came next.

'There's knocking at the gate!' she cried. 'Come, come, come, come, give me your hand.' She held out a hand to a phantom husband. She saw Iain falling further and

further away from her, but she knew she'd made it back into the scene. She only hoped the audience hadn't seen through her seconds of silence. 'What's done cannot be undone.' She breathed, and stared out wildly beyond the stage for the final time that night. 'To bed, to bed...'

As Fay wandered slowly offstage, her heart pounded. She'd come so close to the edge. The play drove on towards her husband's inevitable destruction, but as she moved through the wings she received quiet slaps on the back and the odd thumbs-up. Fay grinned at them all. She felt maniacal, as if she could laugh, or scream. It had worked; her madness had been exactly right.

Mary was being released. Finally, she would be free. Her muscles ached to be used, and she could smell the summer, see the sky. But Dianaimh led her towards the car park. Mary could not return her cheerful look as they got into the vehicle. As they drove, the town flashed by, leaving her with impressions but no knowledge. Houses, bright and new-looking. Damp earth with a growth of trees. More houses, older, more unkempt. And then, in a flash, the sea. Mary stared. Its texture was a shock after the buildings. She smiled.

When they arrived the house seemed old, like it had a memory. Mary wanted somewhere newer, but it was better than the hospital. Dianaimh's parents were subdued; it was because of their other child, Mary remembered, the dead one Dianaimh was still, incredibly, hoping to see again. The woman, Karen, was slight and sad, and the man looked stern. Mary could tell that it was learned, that sternness, that Craig would in fact be compassionate and kind, like his daughter. They came with her as she climbed the creaking attic stairs. In the room which was to be hers, she looked around.

'...for the chores, you know, but here at least you can see down to the coast,' Karen was saying. She sounded hopeful, and Mary could see her desire for approval shining from her eyes. Mary told her the room was lovely. She made all the right noises and gestures to make them leave. Then, finally alone, she stood by the window, and let the sea fill her eyes. It was slate blue, and seemed glutinous and slow from above. It was quiet, too. Mary preferred it wilder and more present. She felt around the wooden

window frame, brushing off loose paint chips, until she found the catch. She twisted, pulled, pushed. It gave, and the window slid up to let in the air. Mary breathed it in, closing her eyes. The crashing sound was like a lullaby; the salt smell calmed her like a mother's perfume. For a moment, she felt peace.

When she opened her eyes again she could see someone on the beach, with what looked like a camera. She stepped back, glowering, into the shadows. Why would they photograph the sea, and make it still? It was futile, she thought, to try to capture what they saw, when that was not the ocean itself. The colours were just reflections of the sky, the water's form just the inverse of what held it. It was wholly shaped by the needs and desires of its surroundings. The wind, the rock, the moon, they all pushed it and pulled it into something else, something for them. Nothing about the sea was its own, except perhaps its bitterness, its sharp, salt tang.

Mary's stomach rumbled. After taking in the music of the sea for another moment, she made herself turn away, and go downstairs.

The family were waiting for her. Dianaimh beamed across at her, and Mary granted her a brief smile in return. This would be the only evening meal she would eat with the family watching her. The rest of the time she would fend for herself, like the B&B guests.

Mary watched as the food was served. She was given meat – lots of it. But she remembered the suspicion her unrestrained hunger had caused in the hospital. Here she would not reveal her need. She made herself wait. Once the others had started eating, then, finally, she could feed.

After the meal she was expected to talk. She covered her face with a pleasant expression, and asked if there were places she could walk. Craig seemed delighted: he brought out maps and pointed out the places near the house where paths began, where she could delve into the woods and walk down to the sea. She smiled at him, memorising the routes, anticipating the fresh air. She wanted to share her discovery of them with these people, but she was not sure they would understand: she wanted to run, not walk, and she would not wait until tomorrow. If they did not understand her they might send her back to that hospital. It would be safer if they did not know. She would

keep her desires to herself.

It took a long time for the Machlins to go to bed. Mary listened to their talk, following the currents beneath their words. She said little. Finally, Karen and Craig said good night, and closed the door to their downstairs bedroom. They had given her a key, and told her that it was rare for them to notice the B&B guests coming and going at night. Dianaimh, however, was still awake. Mary yawned, then flashed Dianaimh a gleaming smile. Dianaimh only half returned it, running a hand through her long hair as she said good night. Mary watched her disappear into her own apartment before she climbed towards her room, letting her feet fall heavily on the stairs. Inside she locked the door, and waited for it to get dark. It took a long time for the lingering summer daylight to leach out of the sky, but Mary did not mind. She sat by the window and listened to the sea, her fingers running over her silver necklace. When the sky finally faded to a deep blue, Mary unlocked her door and crept downstairs. On the first floor landing, she paused to listen. Silence. No one else was awake. Mary continued carefully down the next flight of stairs and towards the door. Outside, the night air was cool on her skin. She breathed it in, raising her head up into the freshness of it. She shook herself, tensing and releasing her muscles. Then she set off into the night. Her limbs seemed to unfurl and elongate as she ran, her movements becoming effortless: this was the freedom she had sought.

She chose the path closest to the sea, and let herself fly as she ran downhill. The waves' music was fitful and unquiet, but to her, it felt right. She ran to its beat, but soon found that her regular, two-legged pounding only occasionally overlapped with the ocean's music. In those moments, she exulted. But the sea soon moved on, and she could not match it again. She had not expected to be so out of time.

In the town centre, at least, the tasks she had set herself were easy. She filled her black sports bag in deserted buildings, taking what she needed from the shops and the streets, her face and figure obscured from anyone watching by a large hoodie. But no one stirred. There was no risk. She should have been relieved, but a darker part of her was disappointed. She wanted a challenge. Still, as the first hints of dawn began to creep over the town, she turned back towards the Creagmuir. Her contentment would have

slowed her down, but she made herself run, trying to race the light. Air rushed past her, pressing into her face, cold and invigorating. The ocean's rushing, swirling sounds had grown louder since she had left.

Donall couldn't subdue his desires. He tried to spend more time in church, but even there, the thoughts crept in. In the mornings before work he had started keeping his curtains closed against the high summer light while he searched the internet for something that would really satisfy him. The usual bound-up girls, the gagged girls, the girls with mascara running down their cheeks as they mutely tried to seduce him – none of them were right. There was something missing. Even the pain-filled videos he was becoming used to didn't seem to take him out of himself like they had before. The camera lingered too long in the wrong places, or took an odd angle, or didn't zoom in closely enough. Donall fidgeted in his chair. He wanted to arrange the girls himself, to bring them under his spell so that they would move – crying, begging, squirming – only for him.

He knew there were forums, social networks of people who did this. He had resisted, trying to pretend he was only a passive consumer. Now he gave in. It took longer than he expected to create a profile, linked to an email address he set up specially, and by the time he'd done it he had to leave for work. It was annoying, to not even have a quick look around the site, but he couldn't afford to be late. There had been another report from the homeless shelter, of a homeless person who hadn't appeared when he'd been expected. He was probably just asleep or drunk somewhere, Donall knew, but he'd have to go photograph his usual sleeping place just in case. He'd done it before, earlier that week in fact. Strange. As he walked to work he wondered if it was a reporting issue, if the shelter had become more zealous in its record-keeping. Or perhaps they'd gone off together, these two men. They'd turn up, Donall thought, as missing people usually did. His stomach lurched as he thought of Iain. People didn't always return.

At the Machlins' Mary found her chores easy and repetitive; they allowed her mind to roam. In the evenings she tended to keep to herself, but one night Mary found

Dianaimh alone in the kitchen, frowning at her laptop.

‘Oh, hi,’ Dianaimh said. ‘Sorry, I was just...’ She waved a hand. ‘Emails.’

‘Am I not missing out, then, by not having email?’ Mary said.

‘Oh!’ Dianaimh looked surprised. ‘I mean, I guess. They’re dead useful though, really. It’s just when they’re all at once... These people want more paintings from me, in, like, the post, but I haven’t done any recently, so...’ She trailed off, letting her hair fall in front of her face.

‘You will,’ Mary said. ‘Do not let them rush you.’

Dianaimh’s face brightened, her forehead uncreasing and her cheekbones rising. It was an attractive change. ‘Hey, I could set you up an email address, if you like,’ she said. ‘I’m good with computers. It’s what I do.’

‘I would like that,’ said Mary. She was not sure what she would use an email address for, but she wanted to prolong the moment. She had not often seen Dianaimh look happy. Mary moved closer to her and bent over the laptop. ‘I have one of these. They said it was mine, from before.’

‘From when you were Margaret?’ Dianaimh said.

‘Yes.’ It was unexpected, Mary thought, to be so understood. Dianaimh just accepted that she had been one person and now she was another. That was how it felt: like she had lost her old skin along with her memory, and then had pulled on a new one when she had come out of the water.

‘Does it work, your laptop?’

‘I do not know.’

‘I can have a look at it, if you like,’ said Dianaimh. ‘I won’t even charge you.’

They shared a smile.

Mary thought of Dianaimh often in that first week, of her rare moments of happiness, her buttercream skin. At the weekend, though, she found only Karen in the house.

‘I am going to walk into town,’ Mary said. She disliked announcing her intentions. It was one of the things they expected, however.

‘That’s a good idea,’ said Karen. ‘Go have a nosey round.’

Mary nodded. She had already moved to go before she remembered.

‘Would you like me to get you anything?’ she said. It was the right thing to do. Karen looked grateful.

‘Aye, actually – would you get us some fruit? Strawberries, if they have them, or raspberries. Here, I’ll get you some money.’

Mary opened her mouth to say, it is all right, I have some, but stopped herself in time. She could not give away the secret of her nighttime thefts. Instead she took Karen’s cash and listened gravely to the directions to her preferred greengrocer before leaving the house.

The town looked different in the bright, unfiltered sunlight; it was full of people. They watched Mary curiously as she passed. She watched them too, from the corners of her eyes, until she was sure it was only her they stared at. A few even nodded to her, as if they knew each other, until she glared at them. She did not know them. They did not know her. But they had seen pictures of her, they knew her face. It was that photographer, she thought, that friend of Dianaimh’s: Donall Fraser. That was why they recognised her.

She kept her eyes on the ground after that, and glanced up only when she needed to orient herself. When she found the greengrocer there were strawberries outside, as if you could just take them. But Karen’s money was there in her pocket, and the passersby would be watching. Everybody was watching. She picked up a punnet and smelled the berries: delicious, for plants. She would buy two, and have one all to herself in her room.

Inside the man at the counter greeted her warmly. She smiled in return. It was an effort. She wondered why these people bothered.

‘You’re the one they found on the beach,’ he said. ‘Margaret. Sorry -’

‘Mary,’ she said. ‘I prefer Mary.’ The man eyed her curiously, just like all the others. She felt the familiar heat of her anger rising. Perhaps he saw it in her stance, because he did not ask her any further questions. He simply put the change in her hand, cradled in a receipt, and said, ‘well, Mary, hope to see you again.’

Mary stalked out. She headed straight back towards the Creagmuir, keeping her eyes on the ground below her and trying not to notice every glance and stare. She did

not even stop to watch the sea. By the time she reached the Creagmuir she was furious. She left the strawberries, the money, and the receipt on the kitchen table and retreated to her room. Finally alone, she paced, her fists in taut balls, her shoulders heaving. If they watched her, they would be watching what she did, what she bought, where she went. She could not be free with their gazes on her, monitoring her constantly. She had thought being out of the hospital would be enough; now she saw the town was no different to the ward. It felt as if there was a bit between her teeth, and somebody holding her back, even here, even now that she was free. She imagined these people blinded for their staring, her thumbs in their sockets, the bright blood trickling out. She could do it to them all, the strangers in the street, the man in the shop, Donall with his staring, his camera... She drew a finger across her necklace and ground her teeth.

Donall had plans in the evening: a drinking session with Chris and Robbie from work. But it wasn't for a couple of hours, so inevitably he switched on his computer. As it loaded he wondered what his days off would have looked like if Iain had lived. Would they have been out doing things together, or would they have drifted apart? They had barely kept in touch these past few years, just seeing each other at Christmas and the odd holiday. It was only when Iain had been offered the job up here and was deciding whether to move back that they'd really started keeping up with each other again. Donall had hoped that they would reconnect, that the years and miles wouldn't have separated them too much. He'd never know now.

Online, he didn't even start with his social media. He went straight to the porn on the website he'd joined that morning. Here there were more and more pictures of women, real women, posing for anyone who wanted to watch. I could get lost here, he thought, if I'm not already. He was trying to tear himself away when he noticed his messages. He already had three. *Hey want to chat? Hello, you looking to play?* And then, with a picture: *What is it you really want?* He opened the picture, half-expecting a scam, or malware disguised as sex. That was what people warned you against, viruses, worms, trojans, the STIs of the internet, caught the same way as in the flesh. But it seemed to be just a picture. She was wearing a latex hood, open only at her red mouth. The mask was

unusual. It had a face on it, a caricature of femininity. Big eyes with comically long lashes stared up at him blankly. Donall wondered if the person behind them could see out. *Just for you*, the caption read. He clicked through to her profile. It didn't say much, but he added her anyway. She called herself K.

He clicked away, switching tabs to Facebook then searching for his church's site, hoping for some better consolation. But the BDSM site started blinking. When he inevitably clicked back to it, a chat window had opened.

'Would you like me to show you some fun?'

It was K, sending him a link. The words she'd typed seemed blocky and unreal. Donall rolled his eyes. There were hundreds of these webcam girls. They were usually such amateurs. He wanted something perfect, choreographed to his precise desires.

'Something you cannot ask the usual girls,' K typed.

Donall's cursor blinked. He wondered who she was.

'Tell me what to do,' K typed. 'Tell me what you want to see.'

She would probably start charging him in a minute. He wondered if he'd sink so low as to actually pay. Then the webcam zoomed out and Donall saw the whole woman, covered in black. There was a coil of rope over the back of her chair. Beside it, he noticed, was a large, ornate knife.

Donall's hands hovered over the keyboard. He shifted in his chair. This didn't seem real.

Two more words appeared.

'Control me.'

Donall inhaled sharply.

'I want you tied up,' he typed, 'to start with.' His words appeared in red.

Dia tried to paint her brother. She daubed on the colour, sketching a jacket, a curl of hair, but she couldn't get him right. It wasn't working. He was fading from her mind; she was losing the image of him. It was her own fault. She'd started remembering him in the past, like all the others. She wasn't looking forward to his future, the future he'd have when he returned.

Slamming the studio door behind her she leant against it, trying to remember, to conjure up her brother's face. She could see his pinched-up smile and hear the words he'd used when he'd come back to visit. 'Quaint,' he'd called their home town, 'the back of beyond'. He'd become ashamed of the place, and maybe therefore of the people who chose to stay in it. As if any of them could help where they were from. They could leave, like Iain, like Fay, but they would always be from here. Dia remembered her brother's face (with so much pain) as he'd said those things – but it hadn't been his. She had seen the others through it, the people who'd taught him those words. He had become like the tourists who came and only looked at the surface of the place, but felt they knew it deeply because they'd taken some pictures and read a romantic novel. She'd not forgiven him for that. (And now -)

Dia shook off the memories, and mapped the colours around her, working her brain on a different problem. The town was spread out below, the rooftops nestled between the low hills and the bay. The houses were speckled white and dark tan, with bright windows reflecting the burst of summer sunshine. She loved this place, she realised, despite the ocean pounding (don't look at it, don't see its power) out to the west.

Movement caught her eye. Was that Mary, moving in front of the attic window? She hadn't been around as much as Dia had expected since she'd moved to the Creagmuir. The woman was private. But Dia thought she could see her adjusting to being here, slowly. Would it be pushy, to go and knock on her door? Or unwelcome? She had seemed to enjoy learning about computers with Dia last week. Maybe she would like company again. But then, maybe that had only been about the laptop, and she preferred being alone. Dia chewed her lip. Would it be insensitive to simply try? She would, she decided; she'd offer her tea, or the strawberries which were on the table. That was what people did. The woman could always say no.

The knock on the door made Mary start. She closed the laptop she'd been using.

'Come in,' she said.

Dianaimh looked in shyly. Mary put on a smile, as warm as she could make it.

‘Hi,’ said Dianaimh. ‘Would you like a cup of tea, or something? There are strawberries, and I could get out some ice cream, if you, uh, want?’

Dianaimh’s eyes slid away from hers. Instead she started glancing round the room. Mary hesitated. Dianaimh was staring like everyone else, trying to pry into what was, for now, her space. But she did not seem to be like all the others. Besides, the mention of food had woken Mary’s hunger.

‘Yes,’ Mary said. ‘I would like that.’

Dia found the ice cream, and bowls and spoons, a knife for the berries. Mary’s dark eyes followed her with a curiosity that made Dia awkward. It was as if she could see into you, like people’s thoughts and desires were just spread open across the table in front of her. Dia let her hair fall in a curtain across her face as she chopped the strawberries into bowls.

‘These are the best,’ Dia said, to fill the silence. ‘They’re from this grocer’s in town, Mum loves it. She won’t go anywhere else.’

‘I met him,’ said Mary.

‘The grocer?’

Mary nodded.

‘You went to town!’

Mary watched Dianaimh’s mobile face as she looked pleased, then curious, then worried again.

‘How was that?’ Dia asked. She saw uncertainty flicker across Mary’s eyes. ‘Sorry, I just -’

‘It is all right,’ said Mary. ‘Town was...’ She could not find the word. ‘People seemed to know me.’

‘Really?’ Dianaimh’s eyes were wide, her face so open. Mary knew she had done nothing to make those people watch her. It was not her fault – only Donall’s. Mary relaxed slightly.

‘God,’ said Dia, watching Mary’s guarded face. ‘That must’ve been weird.’

Mary felt herself smiling without having to try.

‘Yes,’ she said. She paused. ‘I did not like to be watched.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Dia said. She saw through Mary’s smile to the fear behind it, the animal instincts telling her to run and hide. She was so alone, this woman; she must be so tense. Dia wanted to hold her, to reach for her and comfort her; Mary wouldn’t want that (would she?). Instead Dia began scooping ice cream. It was too hard, unready. She should have waited (idiot). The scoop wouldn’t go far enough in. She tried again, harder, but only a tiny piece chipped off.

A warm hand covered hers and Mary took the spoon from her. It cut into the ice cream like butter. Dia opened her mouth, but couldn’t think of what to say. Mary pushed a bowl across.

‘Thank you,’ Dia said. She took a mouthful, and shivered.

‘You are welcome,’ Mary said. Then: ‘It is very sweet.’ She seemed surprised.

‘Mm-hm.’ Dia saw the white ice cream stain the red corner of Mary’s mouth.

‘You’ve got a...here, yeah, wait – I’ll get a paper towel.’

‘Thank you.’

Dia reached up to daub the towel at Mary’s cheek, and Mary gently held her wrist, as if unsure about her touch. But she didn’t push Dia’s hand away. Dia felt a shock of joy. (She shouldn’t, she shouldn’t feel happy, even if -) Her face brightened, despite herself.

6: darkening

The summer deepened. Donall registered the mildness in the air and the occasional real warmth, but he didn't spend much time in it. He had K now. She let him control her: he told her to move the pinwheel slowly across her breasts to her nipples, and then stop, pressing the metal teeth in. It wasn't because he wanted to hurt her more, but because he wanted to see her obey. And she did. It was a balm. He didn't need to give her reasons for what he wanted, he could just demand it.

His phone rang one night, just before he was due to meet her online. It was John.

'Have you thought about coming back to the youth club?' he asked. Donall could hear the disapproval in his voice at how long he'd been gone.

'Aye,' he said. 'But, look, I just...I don't think I'd be any good to you at the moment.' He turned away from his computer. 'I'm really sorry, John, I know I should be there. I just...'

'I understand,' the minister said. 'Still, if you've got a free evening some time,

we'd welcome you.'

'Aye,' said Donall. 'I know.'

He couldn't go to K after that. It wasn't like she was always there for him. She had a life away from him, something they never talked about, but if she couldn't come she would let him punish her. He'd never let her down before. But his desire was weakened after talking to John. The things they did together would look unforgivable to the minister. Donall was just demeaning her like a cartoon patriarch. And yet...he remembered how he'd made her run the pinwheel across her tongue, how she'd smiled. When he'd told her to put it between her legs she'd protested, but she'd submitted eventually. He couldn't deny that this was what he craved.

The weather held, bursts of warmth breaking through the fertilising rain, but the nights crept slowly forward. Mary could leave for her nighttime run earlier every evening. She left quietly, rolling her shoulders under her hoodie and flexing her strong fingers. It felt good to use her body. She ran beside the sea, breathing in the salt tang of it, bathing her ears in its music even though she could not match its tempo. She ran boldly in front of the houses as well now, past their darkened, curtained windows. Nobody was watching her. And if they were, they would only see a troubled teenage boy, an energetic young man; she was swaddled in this hoodie like a second skin, her silver necklace hidden in its folds. She smiled in the darkness, into the warmth of her body. These people were so easily taken in.

But despite being free from the hospital, it still came to her. Jamie the social worker appeared in her attic room every fortnight to question her.

'You've decided to be called Mary, not Margaret?'

'Yes,' she said.

'Why's that, then?'

Mary considered before she spoke.

'I do not remember being Margaret,' she said, and shrugged. 'It seems fitting to have a new name as well as my new life.'

Jamie seemed to accept this. He moved on. 'How are you finding it, living here?'

he asked.

‘It is ideal,’ she said. Her mind was racing. What did he want her to say? ‘I am able to explore the town, and meet people. The Machlins have been very good to me, as well.’

Jamie put his head on one side.

‘It must be grand, to be out of the hospital,’ he said.

Mary gave him a brief, tight smile.

‘Yes. I did not like it there.’

Jamie made a few notes. Mary could not read them; his writing was a scrawl.

‘And you’ve been into town, you said?’

‘Yes.’

‘What was that like?’

Mary felt like she was back there, in the hospital, unfree. These questions all had hidden meanings. She took a deep breath.

‘It was – busy. I bought strawberries.’

‘Where from?’

‘A greengrocer.’

‘And how did that go?’

Mary wondered what he would do if she told him the truth: I wanted to gouge their eyes out and lick the blood from my fingers, because they would not stop staring at me, they would not let me be. ‘It was nice to be out in the sunshine,’ she said instead, ‘and to get to know the place a little better.’

‘You weren’t overwhelmed?’

She paused. ‘No.’

‘And do you have plans to find work, beyond what you’ve been doing here?’ he asked. ‘Perhaps you could ask one of the Machlins for advice with that. We’ve also got some leaflets you might be interested in.’

‘I will ask Dianaimh,’ Mary said. ‘I hope my lack of memory will not be too big an obstacle.’

Jamie was watching her keenly. Then he leaned back, stretching his long arms.

‘You seem very positive about everything,’ he said, with a grin.

Mary allowed herself to relax. This meeting was almost over.

‘But we’ve all got some things we don’t like, right? Stuff we hate, or that we’re scared of.’

Mary remained silent, wary again. He had not finished testing her, prodding and probing at her mind. She should not have lowered her guard.

‘Has there been anything you’ve experienced since coming out of hospital which has made you uncomfortable?’ Jamie asked.

‘No,’ said Mary.

‘Are you sure?’

She did not respond.

‘I want you to think about it,’ he said.

She stared at him. How could she say that everything was uncomfortable, that people’s wants and desires pressed in on her from every side, that everything was hard and bright and new? Everything, that is, except the sky and the sea. If she told him that she would be taken away from them, and confined once more to a single room. She could not allow that.

‘All right,’ Jamie said after a few moments. ‘I’m going to press you on that in future, so have a wee think, right?’

Mary clenched her jaw, and nodded.

In Glasgow, the shortened days were less noticeable. Fay was still able to arrive and leave work in daylight. The cafe was her only work now that *Macbeth* was over. She carried coffees, straining to keep them level, stretching her cheeks to smile at clients who all blurred together. She took as many breaks as she could, ducking outside into the fresh air, smoking fast, sneaking pills when she found a moment. She didn’t take much, just enough for a bit of a mood lift, a bit of a rush. It helped block out the madness, the residue of Lady Macbeth that she was finding hard to shift. The Lady stuck to her like sand, like a memory from a past life.

But now, Fay had to act like a waitress. It helped to be busy, to not have time to

think or to worry about her pupils' dilation being noticed by customers. She could stay in character this way. She seated clients, gave out menus, took their orders and served their food, wiped the tables and thanked departing clients, all with a mechanical grin on her face. A big group came through the door, chattering and loitering, and Fay welcomed them warmly and showed them to the large table at the back. She moved around them, taking down orders, remembering corrections, beaming as the children shouted and the adults changed their minds. She was coming down, she realised; she hadn't managed to sneak in a break before the rush, and now she was losing her momentum. She took the list of orders to the kitchen and picked up waiting plates. She sped off to the correct tables with them and set down the plates, remembering to look cheerful as she said she hoped they'd enjoy their meal. Flattery gets you everywhere, she thought. Her actions seemed detached from what was going on inside her head. She felt like she was watching herself perform, from very far away. The thought made her head spin. She tried to go back to being busy and animated, the perfect waitress-shaped automaton. Her clockwork was winding down, but the plates kept coming and she kept running back and forth and being cheerful and setting down the china as gently as she could and concentrating on not spilling the coffee or the soup and trying to do it all faster and faster and faster, until the rush was over.

Finally the last meals came out, and Fay picked them up, one bowl of soup in each hand. She felt them wobble but knew she would be fine, she'd done this hundreds of times before. She tried to move quickly through the people and chairs and bags, but as she turned her body sideways to let a client move past one of the bowls tipped towards her. She looked back just in time to watch as if in slow motion as the hot yellow liquid ran over the edge of the bowl and, still steaming, over her thumb. She saw her hand jerk back before she felt the sting of the burn, but as the pain set in the bowl fell, bouncing off the table and leaving a trail of soup across the floor before it smashed to pieces against the till. Fay's other hand darted forward of its own accord to try to prevent or fix the mess, but it still held the second bowl of soup. As if from far away Fay thought, this is a farce. Someone should laugh. She hoped it wouldn't be her. The second bowl slipped out of her hand and hit one of the customers on the shoulder. The

plate cracked and fell, and Fay felt herself begin to give way, felt laughter welling up inside her. The soup began to stain the man's shirt and as he leapt up with a cry Fay couldn't help herself: she let out a short bark of laughter. But she recovered. She knew her lines: *I'm so sorry, let me fetch a cloth. Can we get another two soups for table twelve.* But the words wouldn't come out. She got stuck on the first line, and said it over and over again, *I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry*, like a broken mechanical toy. Somebody grabbed her hands to stop them doing any more damage, and dragged her away, into the back room. It was Nina. She shoved Fay's hand under the cold tap and told her not to move before hurrying back into the cafe, shutting the door behind her.

Fay felt cold. It was the burn, she thought, the angry red splotch across her thumb and wrist. It was bright red, too bright to look real. Fay wondered for a moment whether this could all be a dream, a hallucination. Then she heard herself giggling. She wasn't taking in what had happened. She turned the cold tap on harder, as if it might jolt her into sobriety, into sense.

'Fucking *hell*, Fay!'

Nina was back, hands on hips, staring at her in disgust. Fay couldn't think of anything to say. Nina went to the computer and typed something quickly, then printed it and handed it over. It was her written dismissal – she was being fired. The thought was like an icy finger on the back of her neck. She wondered if she should be able to fight this, if there was something in her contract that would save her, but she hadn't really read her contract when she'd signed it, and that had been ages ago. It wasn't her fault. Only people like Donall really took the time to read the small print. Fay guessed he had his contracts and paperwork filed and alphabetised. None of Fay's friends were like that.

Fay left the cafe for the last time, undoing her stiff waitress's ponytail and shaking out her hair. It felt lank and greasy as it fell down her back. She knew she would have to find something else. She had to pay for the rent, the bills, her cigarettes and pills. She would have some money left over from *Macbeth*, she figured, and she would find something else. She had to, now. She walked around a corner and felt the sun in her eyes, blinding her. She couldn't see where she was going.

As she left for work, Dia remembered to check her phone. She hadn't been looking at it much. There was a message from Fay. Dia stopped short with her bike lock in her hand and re-read it, then tried to call her friend. There was no answer. She tried again, and again. Finally she gave up. Maybe Fay didn't want to hear from Dia, really. (Did anyone?) Then she checked when Fay had sent her message: yesterday. Maybe she was just asleep.

Dia was still worrying about Fay being unemployed when Mary appeared. She did that, appearing from nowhere, like a ghost.

'Is it still alright to look around the town later, Dianaimh?' Mary asked.

Her name sounded different in this woman's mouth, not as natural as it had before. But that was Dia's fault – she shouldn't have forgotten about their plan. (Careless.) They were going to look for a proper job for Mary, during Dia's lunch break.

'Of course!' said Dia. She tried to look cheerful, to cover up her mistake, her anxiety about Fay. Mary smiled. Dia wanted to add, could you call me Dia now, but Mary was already turning away.

They met in the pedestrianised town centre. Dia had been so wrong about Mary (about everything). She had thought this woman was going to be a kindred, broken spirit, someone to look after. But Mary didn't need anything from her. She was capable, strong, and so at ease with her new life, with being Mary. She didn't seem to miss Margaret McAskie at all.

'Karen asked you to try this,' Mary said, holding out a thermos.

'What is it?' asked Dia. Her mother was clearly happy to have Mary around, if she was sending her on errands like this.

'Lemonade, I believe.'

It was good that her mother was getting back to her usual culinary experiments. Dia drank obediently; it was cold but desperately sweet.

'*Way* too sweet,' she said, making a face. She could feel Mary watching her. 'Have

you tried it?’ she asked, handing the thermos back.

‘No, but -’

‘Go on,’ said Dia.

Mary squinted at her, seemingly unsure, before raising the thermos and taking a sip. She winced too; Dia grinned. After wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, Mary smiled back. Maybe this will work, thought Dia. Maybe we can find more common ground. But what could she have to share, without a past, a self?

As they started walking Mary watched Dianaimh’s face out of the corner of her eye. It was so mobile, a slight frown there, a tilt to her head, a sudden bright greeting as they passed someone she knew – the minister, Mary realised, shrinking away. After he passed, Dianaimh looked thoughtful, like she was about to say something. Mary tried to guess what it would be. For a second, she tensed, as she realised Dianaimh might have seen her leaving to go running at night.

‘Don’t you wonder?’ said Dianaimh.

Mary flicked through her mind, her brief memories of Dianaimh. She did not understand.

‘About your past.’

Oh.

Dia hadn’t asked her this before – not in so many words. She stopped in the street and turned to face the woman, braving the wary look in her eyes and the tightening in her jaw. (Was that what it was? Could she trust her own judgement about this woman, after all?) She straightened her back, defending her question. She would be open, and maybe Mary would be, too.

‘All the time,’ Mary said slowly. ‘I imagine what I could have been, who I might have been with.’ In her peripheral vision, Dianaimh began to soften.

‘Do you think they miss you?’ Dia asked.

Mary looked vulnerable for a second – just a second – before she answered.

‘I do not know.’

Dia had been right, after all, Mary *was* anxious, uncertain, finding her way like the

rest of them. She could trust that, Dia thought, trust this woman's hesitation. She didn't want to let it go.

'It must be strange, being around so many new people,' she said.

'Yes.' Mary shifted on her feet. She thought of the sea, of how it was pushed and pulled by the things around it, how it could never be just itself. 'They *want*, so much,' she said. Dianaimh laughed softly. Mary turned to her in confusion, and Dianaimh threw her head back and exposing her milky throat. Mary stared at her.

'Sorry,' she said, pushing the hair out of her face, trying to swallow her laughter. 'You just looked so confused, you know? About something so – well, everyone gets that, at least a bit.'

Mary made herself smile. Dianaimh could not be right. Mary knew she was not like the others. But she had seen a wall go down between them. And Dianaimh's laughter was infectious. Mary joined her. It felt good.

Dia felt light as she led Mary through town. The woman was just like everyone else, a little buttoned up but real, human, good. Dia could trust her, she knew. They had both needed that laugh, that moment of peace. Dia hadn't laughed like that for a long time. It was a sign of an upwards trend. (But surely it, too, would disappear as soon as it promised to return, and leave her empty in the dark.)

Mary did not know what to make of Dianaimh's transformation. She had laughed, actually laughed out loud, her face transformed into beauty, and now, as they went from shop to shop asking if they would employ somebody with no memory, she was animated, confident. She made a joke about clothes with a past and Mary being without one. The shopkeeper seemed to warm to her, but could not commit to anything. Dianaimh cheerfully left contact information before moving them on. Mary found it extraordinary how easily Dianaimh took charge, not only of the conversations in shop after shop, but of herself. In the library, she seemed to know the person they were speaking to from long ago. Mary listened as he asked about her brother: the dead one. Dianaimh answered calmly, a little sadly, but without breaking down. Mary was surprised. It seemed that Dianaimh too was changeable, mutable, and perhaps strong. Mary had not expected that.

She followed Dianaimh into the next shop and stopped, listening. There were sounds, everywhere, tinklings and hummings and snatches of melody all jumbled together, different tones and timbres tumbling over each other. Above them all, though, was a single note, rich and earthy. It rose, shining, then fell away. Mary blinked, one hand thumbing her necklace. A memory stirred. It was new, or newly risen, a sound like that one, a note that was clear and pure and clean. Mary couldn't understand it. She had explored every gap in the reeds in her mind. But here was something new, or something she had not noticed before. She stared around the music shop, trying to find its source among the people browsing books of music and trying out guitars. There: a tall man was playing a smaller, wooden instrument in the corner. As she watched he turned, and seemed to recognise her. Was he just another stranger, staring? Mary tensed, made of teeth and claws for a moment, but then he began to play again – and there was that sound. It was low, powerful, and it resonated in her mind. Mary glanced around. No one else seemed to have noticed her moment of consternation. Dianaimh was talking to the man behind the counter, who was shaking his head.

Mary approached him. He was straight-backed and dark-haired, but his face was leathered with age. He gave her a slight bow, and Mary felt a curious stab of recognition.

'Looking to play?' he said, proffering the instrument. It seemed too delicate for the man's large hands. Mary took it, trying to understand – or remember – what to do. The stranger helped, and Mary found herself letting him arrange her. He placed one end on her shoulder, underneath her chin; he moved her hand to cup the other. She did not flinch as he adjusted her position. His touch made no nervous impression.

'It's a violin,' he said, 'a fiddle.'

The word resonated. 'Fidheall,' she murmured. The stranger smiled.

In her right hand he put a long, thin bow; he showed her how to draw it across the strings to make a sound. This was it, Mary thought, a piece of my past. She tried for the note in her mind, but the thing squawked. She tried again. It wouldn't ring true. She felt frustration rising. But the old man gently shifted her hand, her elbow. 'Again,' he said. His eyes were dark, like hers. Mary drew the bow and this time the sound was there, the one she had almost remembered. Mary did not try to chase the memory. She

waited for it to come into focus, and drew the bow back. It was the wrong pitch, but for a second the sound broadened into something rich and full. She played again and again, blocking out the sounds of the shop, Dianaimh's soft voice, to better hear that richness. It came sooner every time. The old man's mouth twitched up at the corner as he tilted her arm. She played a lower pitch this time, the sound more earthy. She liked it. Then he pressed down on one of her fingers. The string bit her flesh but the sound altered. Mary understood. He played a few simple notes on a keyboard and then moved her fingers to match. The fiddle's tone seemed richer and stronger than the keyboard's. Mary closed her eyes to hear better and let her fingers follow the sounds. The frustration and anger inside her began to cool. She no longer minded that she couldn't quite catch the sound in her mind, the memory or dream or imagining. She simply played, creating new sounds.

Dianaimh's voice brought her back to her surroundings.

'Mary!' she said. 'You're a natural.'

Mary blinked, and put the instrument down. Dianaimh was staring at her with admiration. The stranger smiled broadly.

'Might've found the key to her there,' the shopkeeper said. It should have irritated her that even this man who she had not met wanted to unlock her like some box of treasure, to empty her out and paw through her secrets. But she was, unexpectedly, calm.

'You'll be wanting a job,' the dark-eyed stranger said.

Mary smiled at that.

She learned quickly. The notes flowed haltingly at first, scratching and squawking, out of her control. But the stranger helped her. He introduced himself as Campbell, and he let her keep the fiddle. They had lessons together: he would play a tune on his pipes or whistle, and wait while she placed the notes on her own instrument and began to play them back. He would play them again and again until she could repeat them fluidly. She learned tunes this way, reels and airs and lilting strathspeys. And she became accustomed to her instrument, too. The pads of her fingers hardened, and the music

became sharper, clearer. By the time the summer turned, and a new freshness in the air signalled the autumn, her music was beginning to ring true.

Campbell told her more about the job he had in mind. He played with a band, and he thought she would be a good addition. The way he said it, with humour twinkling in his eyes, made her wary. Still, she agreed.

First, she had to negotiate Jamie. He came to see her again; to test her.

‘So,’ he said, settling in to his usual chair, ‘you’re playing music now!’ He beamed at her. ‘How’s it going?’

‘It is going well,’ she said.

‘And are you in a band or anything?’

‘Perhaps,’ she said. ‘I have been invited to join one, when I am ready.’

‘Great!’ said Jamie. ‘And how are you feeling about that?’

Mary clenched her jaw. ‘I am looking forward to it,’ she said. He was still looking at her closely, pen in hand. ‘It will make me feel more’ – she hesitated – ‘part of the community.’

‘And that’s what you’re after?’

‘Of course.’

‘It’s just, well, it’s grand you’re getting so involved here, but I would have expected you to be more curious about your past, about going back to where you lived before, maybe finding similar work? Maybe you played music before, as Margaret McAskie.’

Mary shrugged. He was still staring at her in that penetrating way she hated. She searched for the correct words.

‘I find it hard to imagine that. I cannot see myself in those places and situations,’ she said slowly. ‘I am happy to begin again here.’

‘Very pragmatic,’ said Jamie. Mary thought it was not meant as a compliment. ‘Now. Have you thought about what I asked you?’

Mary remembered: he wanted to know what made her uncomfortable. She would have to give in.

‘People watch me,’ she said. Jamie stared at her eagerly. ‘In the streets. They know who I am.’ She sat back and folded her arms. ‘This makes me uncomfortable.’

‘Good! Good,’ said Jamie. ‘Not about the staring, of course. But I’m glad you thought about what I said. How often has this happened, the staring?’

Mary hesitated.

‘Every time I go to town.’

‘They’re curious about you,’ he said. ‘We all are! But you know, it will fade over time. Being in this band will probably help. Soon you’ll be part of the community, like you said, and no one will bat an eye at you. You’ll just be one of us. Isn’t that what you want?’

Mary nodded automatically, and kept the sneer from her face. She would never be one of them. She was nothing like these people.

Autumn grew colder. Fay couldn’t get another job. She had tried; she’d even managed an interview. Sitting through it she’d wished she had had a drink, or another cigarette, something to soothe the jitters in her limbs. She knew she was competent, skilled, if only they’d give her a chance. But there was always that question that would ruin it all: ‘so why did you leave your last job?’ She lied, of course – and she was a good liar. But they could check, they *would* check, eventually. ‘The cafe was downsizing, so they didn’t need as many staff.’ That was her line. She delivered it with a closed face, to discourage further questions. It hadn’t made any difference. No one wanted her, not even the crappiest places, because she couldn’t give them a reference. She had tried to forge one. It was much harder than she’d expected, finding the right words and tone. After printing out a draft to see how it would look she gave up. The piece of paper seemed so much weightier than a verbal lie.

Dia messaged her, and her friends in Glasgow wanted to go out, but she couldn’t, she didn’t want to have to face them and their questions. On the way back from another pointless interview she stopped to buy cigarettes. She had to put her pin in again; she must not have been paying attention the first time. But the machine still beeped at her.

‘Sorry, hen. Looks like it’s declined,’ said the woman behind the counter. Fay

stared at her. Had her *Macbeth* money run out already?

‘Weird,’ Fay muttered, trying to look confused. She was too tired to do anything else but leave the shop. She could feel the other customers watching her.

Outside it was raining. For once it didn’t matter if her hair frizzed up; there was no one there to see it. She didn’t want to go home. What if her housemates needed rent money already? Fay couldn’t remember what the date was, how long she had left before they realised she couldn’t pay. She was losing her grip.

Someone walked into her and muttered an obscenity. Fay shouted one back. Her own raised voice startled her. It brought her back to herself a little. She had a bit of money in her savings account, she thought, which would maybe cover the rent. Apart from that, could she scrounge food and cigarettes off her housemates? They didn’t even smoke. They were all too good for that, too successful to need a crutch. Fay felt herself getting angry. There was no one to get angry with, not even her housemates, but it was all she had left.

‘Fay, my darlin, how are you?’

Fay stopped and stared at the stocky man who’d stopped her. It was Larry.

‘You can fuck right off, you fucking cunt,’ she said.

Larry looked genuinely shocked.

‘How’s that?’ he said.

Fay glowered at him.

‘You get out of my fucking sight, right?’

She tried to push past him but he held on to her arm. They struggled for a minute before he let her go.

‘Alright, alright,’ he said, backing off with his hands up. Fay tried to walk past.

‘Here,’ he said, following her, and dropping his voice, ‘was the last lot no good?’

He wasn’t going to go away. Fay stopped walking and faced him.

‘It was fucking fine, Larry – only lost me my job!’

‘Hey, hey, that’s no my fault, right?’ Larry was still being defensive. ‘I just give you the stuff, no tell you what to do with it.’

‘Aye, well, fuck off.’ She was shouting now. She could hear the edge in her voice

where it verged on tears, the edge that made her sound crazy. She choked it back. People walking past were glancing out at them from under their umbrellas. Fay knew she should feel ashamed, but she no longer cared.

‘Here, how about I give you a wee advance, right? Make you feel better. You can pay me later, once you’re back on your feet.’

His tone was softer now, and he was looking at her intensely, an eager smile on his face. Fay warmed to him despite herself. It was nice to be looked at like that, like she was the only thing that mattered. He was a better actor than she was, it seemed. She made herself scowl at him. He was already moving closer.

‘Aye, see, you’ll be awright,’ he said, grinning. His lips were chapped and meaty, but his crooked grin lit up his face. Fay looked around at the rain, the people walking with purpose, the homeless guy huddled under a doorway, the kids shouting and running. It all seemed so far away from her. She just wanted to let go. She looked back at Larry and pursed her lips. It would feel good to let go. She might feel free, for a while.

‘What kind of stuff?’ she asked.

Fay snorted it in her room, not worrying about trying something new alone, not worrying about when she’d have to pay. She just let go. She didn’t even go out; she just stayed in her room and put on some music. She could feel her heart speeding up, but it wasn’t in time to the music. She got up, unsteadily, and started dancing. At least she knew what the rhythm should be. She danced like she was in a club, all hips and shoulders and smiling face. Something bumped into her from the side and she turned to frown at it. It was her wardrobe. It must have been her who’d bumped. She looked around to smile at someone, to off-load her embarrassment by being self-deprecating, and realised, finally, that she was alone. The room was empty. Only her self looked back at her, refracted through her things, her clothes on the floor, her discarded magazines, the old photos on the walls. There was no trace of anyone else in the room. She had no one to tell her it would be all right, no one to pull her back from the edge. She watched her hands tremble and felt her aloneness overwhelm her. It pushed down on her, pressing her into a shallow pit where she would lie, crying, shivering. The music faded

and it seemed like everything was crumbling, but Fay was still dancing, right on the edge of the pit.

A new song began. It was slow, with power-ballad chords that thumped out empty emotion. Fay couldn't remember if the song got better, if it sped up and became danceable. The chords were building. She didn't know how to dance to this song. Even when it finally hit its high point, and the beat started, Fay wasn't sure she could follow. She closed her eyes, and let the bass pulse through her. She let herself laugh, and she danced. She danced all around her room, wildly inhabiting every corner, taking ownership of all the crap on the floor as she danced across it. It was bliss, suddenly, to have energy fizzing inside her, to be dancing by herself, to be happy. She felt like it was going to last forever, this music, this great wave that carried her. It let her fly.

7: tears

Mary played every day, now, up in her attic room. The notes flew. They reverberated through her fingers, through her mind. Soon she could control them. She was becoming adept, learning all the little things, the turns and snaps and syncopation which added magic to the melodies. The approach of autumn seemed to help; she could play better in the dark.

Campbell approved, and said she was ready. It was the day before Samhainn, Halloween, when she went to meet his band. She arrived at the pub they played in ready to defend herself from stares and judgement, but it was half-empty. The musicians were in a back room, already absorbed in the music. None of them saw Mary, and it was too early for an audience. It was a relief to be unwatched. Campbell was playing a slow air on the uilleann pipes. The melody curled and twisted, flowing like a mountain stream. A red-haired woman beside him was playing a large accordion. The tune seemed to fade away, but just before it could, the third musician joined in, his bodhran adding pace.

The slow notes fell away, and then the music leapt into a reel. Now all three of them came to life. The drummer's shaggy-haired head nodded as he kept time, and the woman's small hands flew. Campbell remained still as he played, only one heel tapping the floor. They played with such energy. The stream had turned into a rushing river, and Mary responded to the music as she did to the sea: she wanted to be part of it, and felt somehow that she already was.

When the tune ended, the musicians flashed smiles at each other. Then Campbell turned to greet her.

'Mary!' He gestured for her to sit down. 'She's the fiddler,' he said to the others.

The accordion player was called Siobhan Hill, the drummer Ben Bochdan. As they were introduced the two musicians looked at her without threat, without too much curiosity, and Mary began to relax. The drummer's red-rimmed eyes only appraised her for a moment, and the woman just gave her a quick smile before reaching for her glass. She was drinking milk, Mary noticed.

'Why don't you play us something,' said Campbell as Mary sat down. She understood: this was a test. But she was not worried. She knew she would be able to keep up with these players. And there was something more. Here she felt no need to pretend, or to act like other people. This group, or the quiet back room, had put her completely and confidently at ease.

Mary was surprised at herself. This peacefulness was unlikely to last. She should not be lulled so easily.

She drew her bow across the strings, and began a tune Campbell had taught her. It was lilting and deft, rising and falling like cliffs. Mary felt her fingers control the melody. She could do this. When Ben joined in, quietly at first, she turned towards him. She could feel the music thrum. Boldly she sped up into a rant. Siobhan smiled broadly and joined in, and after a moment, so did Campbell. The accordion's bass was a rock to rest the melody on, and the pipes soared above it, giving it wings. Mary smiled.

The tune moved, and changed. The old man's eyes flashed as he pushed the tempo up and up. The others kept their eyes down, communicating with their ears, their bodies. Mary kept up. She had not known that she knew this tune, but the music

was simply there, in her fingers. It powerful, like lightning, and it thrilled her.

Finally, the tune rose to a finish. Campbell raised an eyebrow at the others. Ben shrugged and nodded. Siobhan muttered something Mary did not catch. She felt the heat of the music mix with the beginnings of rage: they were going to discuss her, to judge her. They would dissect her playing like the hospital had dissected her mind.

Mary got up to leave them alone while they discussed. As she closed the door she heard Campbell saying, 'she's like us.' She felt familiar derision lifting her eyebrows, but he was right. She *had* felt a kind of connection there. She had thought it was only the music.

When she returned, they had decided: she was formally invited to join their band, the Ragweed Nags. She would be paid a little every week, with more coming in when they could get it. The money would be flexible and irregular; it would be a perfect way to add legitimacy to the cash she was accruing in the black bag beneath her bed. It was a fitting start to the new year. People did not consider this the new year any more, Mary reminded herself; it was an older celebration, from when the year began in darkness.

In Glasgow, Fay woke. She didn't know how much time had passed, since her spree. She might even have got up since then and gone back to sleep. She couldn't remember much. Her cheek was stuck to a magazine, her body sweating. She rolled, groaning, and pushed herself up. She remembered, like a slap, that she had nowhere to be, nothing to do. She shed her clothes and slumped onto her bed. She would sleep. She would be oblivious, and at peace.

But she couldn't sleep. She lay crushed by the weight of her own tiredness. Her body was like a sand bag, or ballast, unable to shift under its own weight. Her eyes itched, and her yawns seemed to stretch her stiff, tense jaw to breaking point. She shifted under the covers, but even that tiny movement was a huge effort. This was like hell, she thought, or what someone like Donall must think of hell. No, she decided, this was something more visceral: it was like being captured by a kelpie, being held prisoner in some underwater otherworld. Fay tried to push the covers away. Without them, her arms were cold, but the rest of her was stifling. She turned over. It seemed to take all her

effort, that simple motion. She lay, panting, one arm flung out across the duvet. Her eyes closed of their own accord, but she was still aware of the bed, her breathing, the pull of her hair to one side. The duvet only half covered her, and she imagined pulling it up, getting warm; but then she would be stifled, sweating, and would have to take it off. The duvet in her mind moved like the tide, covering then uncovering her beached body. She breathed, and pale sand slid off her. She shifted slightly, and boats rolled on the waves, tipping and buckling like they were made of paper. She remembered playing with boats like this in the shallows as a child, waving them up and down through the air. Tiny people clung to their railings as they rose and fell. One detached from the boat, arcing through the sky like an old cartoon, landing with a paper splash in the sea. From the boat a tiny person in red was watching, turning, disappearing into the dark.

Fay woke, her pulse thudding fast in her temple. She had heaved herself upright and swung her feet down to the floor, ready to run, before she realised why she wanted to. Iain. She'd been dreaming of Iain. At least, that's what it felt like; but the images were twisted, like she was looking through mottled glass. Fay shivered, remembering the paper boats, the exaggerated arc of the tiny figure's fall. They had seemed so flimsy and fake, except that it had happened. She remembered now. It had really happened like that: the waves, the fall, and the woman watching in the bright red dress.

Fay groped for her phone and scrolled through her contacts. She didn't know what to say, just that she had to say it. She paused on Dia's name, but kept going. She didn't want to give her friend more to worry about. A little further down the list was Donall. He could handle this. And besides, he was police.

Once Fay had sent her message she collapsed again. She longed for sleep, to disappear from the world again. But she couldn't shake the image from her mind. Iain fell, again and again, and behind him, watching, was the woman in red. She was smiling.

Donall was with K. He switched on his laptop to see her before even brushing his teeth or checking his phone in the morning. She was there, dressed up, a pointed witch's hat incongruous above her latex hood. It was almost Halloween, Donall remembered. He

knew she had bewitched him but he didn't care: she cut into her breasts, slowly, carefully, just as Donall directed. Now, she moaned with pain, and Donall gave another order, watching as she writhed and pouted. He held his breath, but again, she obeyed him. It was a relief, a visceral relief that went beyond arousal. She painstakingly covered the marks in clips, the teeth biting into her flesh, opening her wounds. Donall could see her pain, her every reaction. Finally she typed the word he'd been waiting for: 'please. Please stop.'

'No,' Donall replied. His phone beeped. It was Fay. That was odd, but he didn't need to look at it now. She would only slip out of his grasp; she couldn't be controlled like K. Fay would never allow him this release. K was different. He would stay with her all day, if he could. Time didn't matter as he ordered her movements and controlled her pain.

Fay woke from a sleep which felt like it had lasted for days. The morning sun filtered into her room, and she stretched, blinking in the light and yawning happily. She was rested. She felt like she could get up.

Then she remembered the woman in the red dress. Iain. She had actually told Donall – Donall, of all people! – about her ridiculous dream. It hadn't happened like that, it couldn't have, Fay thought; I wasn't with him, I was dancing. But the woman in the red dress wouldn't leave her mind. Her paper face was unrecognisable.

Fay stumbled to the bathroom and peed. She didn't know where the liquid had come from; she still felt dehydrated. She brushed her teeth and splashed a little water on her face. She cupped her hands and gulped it down, craving it, swallowing handfuls. Her stomach crawled with hunger.

In the kitchen Fay grabbed a packet of biscuits that weren't hers. Her mind still followed the figure, falling, again and again. Fay squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't make the vision go away; she couldn't think beyond it.

She heard her phone ringing. It was probably Donall, concerned and keen. Fay groaned, but she padded back to her room to answer it.

'Hi,' she said, ready to apologise, tell him it was nothing.

‘Hello, is that Fay Duncan?’ It was a woman’s voice, crisp and professional.

‘Uh, yes,’ Fay said, a little too loudly. Her voice sounded croaky.

‘This is Christine from Buchanan Lettings, I’m just calling about the rent?’

Fay’s stomach lurched. In an instant she was back by the pit, teetering on the edge. She swallowed, trying to bluff.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘right?’ Did she sound surprised enough? Was she overdoing it?

‘Yes, I’m afraid it seems like your portion of the rent hasn’t gone through this month.’ The woman left a small pause. Fay felt tears spring to her eyes. She didn’t know what to say. But the woman carried on cheerfully. ‘Have you had a problem with your bank?’

Fay swallowed. This was her way out.

‘I guess so,’ she said. ‘That’s weird.’ She was managing it, the bland, unworried tone of voice. ‘I’ll have a look online and get back to you?’

‘Great,’ said the woman. ‘Let us know when you manage to get it to work.’

‘Okay,’ said Fay, and let her phone fall. She couldn’t believe it. What had she spent the money on?

Tears choked her. It was over, really over. She had no work, no money, and now, soon, no flat. She had pretended so hard that it would all work itself out, that she’d get better, somehow, and get a call-back, get a job. Now she had nothing.

She thought, with an ache, of Iain. He was the one she needed. Even if he hadn’t been as interested in her as she’d hoped, he still would have been there for her. He would have come down, bought her a meal, listened to her problems and, somehow, made her laugh. Maybe he would have helped in a more tangible way, too. Maybe he’d have found her something. In her mind the little paper man fell up and out of the boat, the red-dressed woman watching from behind. Fay wrapped her arms around herself. They were the same, now, her and Iain: futureless. At least Iain didn’t have to keep going, Fay thought. At least now he was free.

Donall woke late the next morning. He remembered Fay’s text, but it gave him a jolt of pleasure that he’d been able to ignore it. He opened it now: ‘I remembered something

from the party,' she wrote. 'It seems crazy, but I know it's true. Someone pushed him in.'

Donall didn't understand. What had Fay found? How could she think...what she was thinking? He remembered the photos from the party, full of blurs which might have been people or could have been simply lights. Their swirls of colour haunted him as he scrambled into clothes and started driving. He barely thought through what he was doing until he was half way to Glasgow. An hour away from home, he realised that he hadn't even phoned. She could have been making it up, messing with him like she'd done years ago when they were still in school. But there was something more, he could sense it: a hidden desperation that he couldn't ignore. He hoped he wasn't wrong.

He found her building, one tenement among many. He rang the bell, and a muffled voice answered.

'I'm here to see Fay,' he said. His voice sounded surprisingly deep, almost sinister, as it reverberated back to him on the intercom. At least he hadn't come across as pleading. What if she didn't let him in, he thought; what if she mocked his haste? He straightened his shoulders against the thought.

Fay was lying curled on her bed when the doorbell rang. She started. What if it was the letting agency people? What if they wouldn't leave until she paid? She listened as the door opened. One of her housemates was talking to someone – a man. Maybe it wasn't about the rent.

Then there was a knock on her door. She got up, wrapping her dressing gown around herself before she answered.

It was Donall. He looked smart, well-dressed. Fay had remembered him as timid and hopeful, but his expression was serious. Fay felt her stomach turn over. She was suddenly aware of the pyjamas she'd been wearing for days, the state of her room, her hair.

Her housemate Kiera was standing behind Donall, glancing between the two of them, trying to work out their situation.

'Uh, come in,' said Fay. Her voice came out hoarse and mumbling, and she

coughed to clear her throat. She closed the door behind him and wondered what to say.

Donall was shocked at the change in Fay. Her face was a mess of shadows and her body was too thin. As she cleared some clothes off the end of the bed, making space for him to sit, she seemed ashamed. That wasn't like her, not in front of him. Donall sat down and took in her room. He had thought he would have been eager to lap up the signs of her life, her self, strewn across the floor and tossed over the furniture, but now he didn't want to look. He couldn't believe the change in her, her faded expression. He wanted to shake her, to make her bright and laughing again, even if that meant she would mock him. He actually wanted the mean Fay back, the one he could never keep up with. He didn't know how to treat this fragile creature. She was slumped on the bed, her hands twitching.

'Fay,' he said. It came out pleading, in his usual pathetic tone. She didn't look up. He cleared his throat and tried again. 'Fay.' This time there was an edge in his voice. Fay raised her head. She looked a little startled. Donall was pleased to have got her attention. 'What happened? What did you remember?'

Fay started rocking, just a little. She couldn't find the words. It was all so ridiculous. She hadn't believed it, not really, but now he was here. 'It's probably nothing,' she said faintly. 'I'm just...I'm not, not really myself, you know.' She didn't want to tell him about the cafe, the drugs; the rent.

'Fay,' Donall said again. He could so rarely say her name out loud. 'Tell me.'

'I had a – a dream...' But had it been a dream? The paper woman smiled and smiled in Fay's mind. Was that me, she thought? Could it have been anyone else? 'I don't know who it was,' she said, 'but someone was there when he fell, someone smiling...' Fay felt tears welling up. She didn't have the energy to fight them, not even in front of Donall. She covered her face as she cried.

Donall heard the mewling sound of her crying, astonished. He'd never seen her like this. Putting a gentle arm around her, he let her relax into him, shaking his body with her sobs. He brushed her hair back from her face, allowing himself that small touch of her skin, and tried not to hold her too tightly.

As the tears soaked Fay's face, soaked into Donall's shirt, she wished they could

wash her away, her and Iain. She wept harder as she remembered how he smelled, what it might have felt like to clutch at his shirt. She would have wrapped her hand in it and wished to be closer to him.

Donall felt her clutching at his collar and closed his eyes. This was what he'd wanted, for so long: not the tears or the awful shaking, but this closeness. Her every movement, every breath, touched him and moved him. Donall lowered his face to her hair. He found himself half-praying for the moment to last. Fay raised her tear-streaked face, and stared at him, her imploring eyes half-focused, a strand of hair across her cheek. He'd never been this close to her.

'Iain,' she said. It sounded like a keening, at first. Then Donall realised, like a punch to the gut, what she was saying. 'Iain. He – he's really gone.' Donall felt his face become wooden, expressionless, as Fay's eyes softened at the memory of their friend. He forced himself to nod, but he couldn't help pulling away a little. He could tell Fay felt it.

Fay thought, it's all over. He's going to leave. He's not going to listen, to help. 'Donall,' she said, and her voice sounded broken. 'Donall, please.'

His breath caught, at that, and he made himself turn away. This hot rage was something he only allowed himself to feel with K, when she begged. Fay couldn't see that part of him.

'Just – just explain what you remembered,' he said. His voice had that authoritative edge again. He swallowed.

'I'll try,' she said, searching for the right words. The demanding note in Donall's voice calmed her, and made it easier to think. 'I was wearing red, I was the only one, I think, but...'

'I know,' said Donall. He grimaced. 'I remember. But -'

'But it wasn't me,' she cried, 'it couldn't've been me!'

Donall breathed. He wanted her to get to the point. He wanted to slap her pretty face and get her to explain more quickly, more clearly. He breathed deeply, clenching his hands, fighting the urge.

'She was wearing red,' Fay said, 'when he fell. She was watching, Donall, and smiling, and...it was me, it had to have been me, because who else was wearing red, who

else could it have been!’

‘Fay,’ Donall said, and she could hear the edge in his voice. She tried to focus, and she could, she could manage if he pushed her.

‘It wasn’t me,’ she said slowly, ‘so there was someone else.’ Donall saw her work it out, finally, and heard her voice fill with wonder. ‘There was someone else on our boat.’

Dia cycled home past the Halloween-decorated shops. The oranges and blacks were so stark, so obvious; she was thinking of softer colours. She could paint leaves, she thought, trees. They didn’t have to be good or sellable: the B&B was closed for the winter. They just had to be. It had been months (five, almost six) since she’d painted properly, since she’d done anything worth hanging on a wall. (Useless.)

She let herself into the Creagmuir to leave the Halloween sweets she’d bought on the table. It was still early. The autumn light was pale, and nobody was about. On the walls there were gaps, empty spaces where Dia’s work should have been. Her parents had done well to hide them (covering her failure) with photographs and a corkboard. They’d pinned up some of their pamphlets across it. Dia stared at the newest one, advertising some kind of folklore trail, and scowled. Just because her work wasn’t there, because there wasn’t anything trying to be true, that didn’t mean they had to revert to this kind of false, romantic idea of Scotland.

Dia paused in the hall. She knew she wasn’t good enough, but she didn’t want to feel it all the time. Perhaps Mary would understand. No: she had her own life to worry about, the fiddle lessons she was taking, this new band. (It was selfish to even think of it.) Dia went into her studio instead. The easel still faced the wall. Dia tried not to look at it (another failure, another lie). Instead she took out a watercolour board. She had always painted the sea, in all its moods, sparkling, murky, blue. But now the world was becoming dull and wintry. Dia wanted the colours of spring. She took out all her greens, from the dark jadeite to the bright, leafy sap green. She pulled out the yellows, too, lemon and burnt sienna. She closed her eyes for a moment, imagining. There were so many shifts, with trees: forest, olive, moorland changed with a breeze to pixie, electric, even lime. Could she tell that truth, or would she fail here too? The colours

were never fixed, they were always changing. But Dia wanted a dell, a safe green place in the woods: somewhere (this was pathetic) far from the sea.

She sketched with leaf, with pixie; she shaded with white, with Payne's grey, and with a waxy blue. Shadows were pitch, mud, violet. The greens began to shift beneath her fingers, merging and shading, one thing becoming another so subtly that it was a surprise, to look back and see that the bright grass had become a deep shadow. Her work wasn't brilliant, but it was adequate. (Were they true, these shifting forms? Could she tell, any more?) I could add animals, she thought; a deer, a fox. Dappled things, in the falling light.

Donall felt the world shifting around him as Fay told him about her vision. It wasn't true; it couldn't be true. And yet, he thought clearly of Mary, of Margaret McAskie. It couldn't be her, he told himself. That didn't make sense.

'I don't know if there's anything I can do,' he said, but his mind was already racing through the kind of evidence he might find, the people on the force who would listen.

Fay's phone rang, and Donall saw her freeze. She looked at the number and her face crumpled.

'What is it?' he said. He'd forgotten, for a moment, how broken she seemed. There was more going on here than just the vision, although that was more than enough.

'It's...' Fay took a breath. 'It's the rent, I -' She turned away from him, staring at her phone, waiting for the call to drop. 'I'll work it out,' she said. 'It'll be fine.'

Donall heard her voice waver, and remembered her tears. She was crying for herself, he thought, not just for Iain. That, he could help with.

'Hey,' he said, his heart racing, 'why don't you come back with me? I'll need to take a statement anyway, and it would help if you were closer. That way – that way it'll be easier for you.' They didn't feel like his words, these easy, light-sounding phrases which could take her life apart. He believed in them, but he knew he was manipulating her to believe in them too. Donall felt, for a moment, like Iain, with his facility for

language, his easy way with the world. 'I can help you,' Donall said. He wanted her to know that he meant it.

Fay stared at him. He was giving her a lifeline. And as she looked around her desolate room she realised there was nothing for her, here. She trembled as she gave in.

'I – I'll need to pack,' she said. It felt like she had been falling; now she was being caught, caught and held. She couldn't tell if she was being held gently, freely, or if the hands were rough and gripping.

Donall looked around her room, wondering how long it would take her. He saw the smudge of white powder on her dressing table, the curl of paper next to it, and balled his fists. He hadn't wanted to see that. He tried to keep the disgust from his face as he turned back to Fay.

'We can leave tomorrow,' he said, his voice curt. 'We'll have to tell Dia about what you saw.'

Dia's painting began to take shape, its forms and colours coming together. It would be banal, she knew, but competent. Perhaps that was enough. She would just add a shade of almond to the top of that branch, and a deeper darkness at the heart of that shadow. She sat back, and stretched. Could she do it? Could she still make things which were – enough?

Something moved, in the corner. Dia started. A shape moved forward. It was Mary.

'Oh,' she said, relieved. 'It's only you.'

Mary smiled. 'I brought you a meal, from your parents,' she said, proffering a covered plate. 'I did not want to disturb your art.'

'It's okay,' said Dia. 'I need a break.' She could smell the food, savoury and delicious, but the gesture seemed to trap her. Why had her parents sent Mary with the food, if they didn't want to disturb her? Why not leave the food quietly, and go? There was something about Mary, something which seemed to prick Dia every time they spoke. Dia could never decide if it was attraction or wariness; there was always this uncertainty. (Ridiculous – she had to get over it.)

‘Is it too cold to sit outside?’ she said.

‘I do not think so,’ said Mary. ‘It is warm, for Samhainn.’

Dianaimh looked at her curiously, and Mary cursed herself. She should not relax around these people, not even Dianaimh, with her skin like cream. They knew nothing of the old festivals. It was foolish of Mary to bring them up.

‘What’s Samhainn?’ Dianaimh asked. Mary ground her teeth.

‘Halloween – an older name,’ she said. Hopefully that would be the end of it. But Dianaimh was interested.

‘How old?’ she asked.

Mary answered honestly: ‘I do not know.’

‘You must have been reading those damn pamphlets from the B&B,’ said Dianaimh.

‘Yes,’ said Mary, turning away.

Outside, they sat facing the town. Dia relaxed into the other woman’s presence as she ate in the cold sunshine. It was nice that they could be silent together, Dia thought. It was restful.

‘What is it you are painting?’ Mary asked.

‘Trees,’ said Dia. ‘I – I usually paint the sea, you know? Sell them to the tourists. But...’ Dia shook her head. ‘I felt like painting trees,’ she said.

‘They were beautiful,’ Mary said. ‘They looked...’ She paused, and Dia felt a rush of affection as she watched her search for the right word. ‘They looked alive.’

After her meal, Dia lingered. She was enjoying Mary’s company, hearing about her music, talking about her art.

Then: ‘You have not been back to the sea,’ Mary said. It sounded like a question.

Dia stiffened. Even here, in the lee of the garage you could still hear the waves, eating incessantly into the shore below. She had been able to ignore them until now.

‘I am sorry,’ Mary said, placing a warm hand on Dia’s arm. ‘I did not mean -’

‘It’s okay,’ Dia said, swallowing. ‘I look at it every day.’

‘That is not the same.’

Dia shrugged. She felt tears pricking her eyes, and she tried to knuckle them away. Mary's arm slid around her, and Dia felt her there, close, pulling her down.

'I am sorry,' Mary said again, her voice muffled. 'I am sorry for everything.'

Dia sobbed into Mary's shoulder, sinking into the darkness of her hair. Mary stroked her back and held her, held her. Dia didn't have to be strong any longer; with Mary, she could rest.

Slowly, the tears ebbed. When Dia finally looked up, Mary's own eyes were glistening. She wiped her eyes, then gently brought her hand to Dia's face. Their tears glittered together on her thumb before rolling away.

Mary kissed her, and Dia felt becalmed. A veil seemed to have been pulled across between herself and her pain. Affection was so easy, she thought, so necessary. Leaning against Mary, she felt the other woman's heartbeat, a soothing rhythm against the sound of the waves. When Dia looked up at her Mary's eyes were bright and searching. Dia kissed her again, softly and resolutely. Mary's mouth was warm.

That night, Dia dreamed in sounds rather than colours. She realised this oddity as she woke, hot and blinking in the sunlight. The sliver of sky between her curtains was pale and bright, the colour of morning. She'd managed a whole night's sleep. That was a relief.

She tried to remember the sounds in her dreams. There had been music, deep and fast, drawing her in. It had changed, she thought, to hoofbeats, pounding, racing towards something, or away from something. Dia frowned. The sounds were fading. In their place came memories, joyful ones for once. The thought of Mary – their kisses, Mary's body strong against hers, the warm hope of something more – was enough to make Dia kick at the duvet entangled with her feet, to give her the drive to get up and stagger into the day. As she got up, though, she found she didn't need it. Strange. She was full of energy. Stretching, she listened to her body. Any energy she'd had lately had been jittery and unpredictable; now she felt calm, but strong, like something was supporting her.

(How long would she have before it let her fall?)

As she got up she focused on the sunlight. It wasn't just the pale shaft at the top of her window; it was seeping through the curtains and flooding the room. It was what was called golden, but Dia saw it as pale: a deep yellow ochre base, with pale cadmium at the edges, and lots of white. She could paint it, properly, in oils.

Dia pushed back the curtains and the light hit her chest, her neck, her cheeks. Now it was brighter, as if there really was gold in it, something metallic mixed in with the colour. How would she mix it: with the same base as the earlier, paler light, or from something completely new? As she looked around her brightened room she saw the rays light up all the corners, even the places she had begun to think it could never reach. It was a final glimpse of warmth and light, she thought, before winter's darkness fully took control.

I will manage, Dia thought, I will go paint, right now. I will capture the light. She just needed to get the pale autumn light of the morning down before it faded from her mind. In the studio she looked about for her easel. It was in the shadows, facing the wall, where -

Ah. There it was. The thought of Iain, like a knife in her side. (So much less painful than it had been, once.) She had avoided it so carefully, but now it made her pause. The unfinished (barely started) painting sat on her easel like a millstone. She couldn't move it, she couldn't touch it. This was impossible.

No. Dia straightened. There was a second easel, smaller but functional. She dug it out and found a blank canvas, a tall rectangle. She drew the lines, faint, long, expanding. In her mind they shone. Once she was happy with the angles and slopes she started mixing the colour. She started with pale cadmium – nothing too rich, for now – and gradually, carefully, added white. The light had been so pale, so liquid. She mixed slowly, trying to get it right. It needed a spark, the thing that made it not just colour, but light. She thought about a dab of scarlet, but it would be too warm and friendly; she needed something cooler. She rummaged through her oils. There: silver. She added a dot, and mixed. Another dot, or was that too much? Not quite. The metallic colour shot through it with a cool glimmer, like the morning. The warmth would come later, further down the painting, and she would add more white, maybe lemon, for the very

top. (Was she good enough for this?)

Dia left the paint, for a moment, to choose a brush. She didn't want thin lines today. She wanted broad, bold, strokes. There were thick brushes, ones she never used; they had come in a pack with some she'd needed. (Another waste, like -) Her mind was full of distant waves. Dull misery began to settle back over her like dust.

But Dia fought it. She closed her eyes and tried to conjure back the light, its energy. Picking up her broadest brush, she dipped it into the pale, glimmering colour and began.

Mary had seen Dianaimh unlock her studio and disappear inside. She wondered if she had been right to reveal her knowledge about Samhainn. It was when things were not as they seemed, when it was easiest to be misled.

The waves were high and crashing, the spray cold and fresh. Mary smiled.

8: magnetism

Dia was still painting long lines of light when her phone rang. She started, wiping her hands before she answered.

‘Hey Donall,’ she said. He started talking, rapidly, anxiously. ‘What?’ she said. ‘Slow down.’ She listened in shock as he told her about Fay: the rent she couldn’t pay, her terrible thinness. He said he’d brought her back. ‘What, here?’

‘Aye. I’ve just dropped her with her mum.’

‘Shit,’ said Dia. ‘Should I go over? Is she up for having visitors?’

‘Aye, I think so. But -’

‘I’ll head there now, then. Her mum’ll be in a state too.’

Donall wanted to tell her something else but Dia brushed him off and hung up. Fay was what mattered right now. As she tidied her paints away Dia looked at her painting. The lines were few and small, and not quite what she’d held in her mind. For today, though, they were enough. She felt light, even as she went to comfort her broken

friend. (Would it last, this marvel? Or would it, too, slip away?)

After Dia hung up on him, Donall swore. He should have pushed through her dismissal, and forced her to listen, to hear about Fay's vision. But Dia hadn't sounded like herself on the phone. She'd been distant and oddly calm.

Donall put his phone away. He would try again tomorrow. Right now he had to get to work. It was the weekend, but the station would be open, processing the usual emergencies. He'd be able to work. Even if what Fay had told him was just a dream, or a drug-induced hallucination, he had to be sure. He had to check.

Dia rang the bell at the bottom of the tenement, feeling like a child again. She had come here so often to pick up Fay, to go into town or down to the beach; later, they had gone to bars or the town's one good club. Fay had never been ready on time, Dia remembered; she used to open the door in a blur of apologies, and Dia would sit curled on her bed, watching her put the finishing touches to her outfit and adding make-up Dia didn't really understand. She had always enjoyed that time, talking over low music, drinking from bottles, watching her glamorous friend prepare to face the world. She had always seemed so solid, so successful at being who she was: not dependable exactly, but dependably herself.

The door buzzed, and Dia went in. Along the hall, a door opened, and for a moment Dia thought it was Fay's mother. Fay was grey – dove, stone – and there was dark purple, like a bruise, under her eyes. Dia remembered her with vibrant eyeshadows: acid green, electric blue. They had faded to a pale shimmer as she'd got older, but now Fay looked like a ghost of what she had been. Dia realised with a start (selfish, not to have noticed before) that Fay loved Iain too, in her own way. People beyond the family were sick with missing him.

Before she knew it, there were tears, catching in the back of her throat, stinging her eyes. They hugged, holding each other in the doorway until Dia pushed back and put her hands on Fay's shoulders.

'We need tea,' she said. Fay choked out a laugh, and wiped her eyes, nodding. Dia

moved past her to fill the kettle.

They went into the living room, not Fay's bedroom like when they were kids. Dia worried their conversation would be stiff and difficult, but as Fay plopped down on the sofa and said, 'I fucked it all up, Dia, I don't know how it happened,' she knew they would be all right.

'Tell me,' said Dia, bringing over two mugs, her own a darker praline to Fay's milky caramel. She set them down, then sprang up again, remembering. 'Sugar!' She turned, paused, the awkwardness returning – 'sugar?'

'Two please,' said Fay guiltily. Dia didn't chastise her like usual, she just brought it over, spooned it in and stirred. Milky, sugary tea: that was supposed to be for shock. How British they were today.

Dia sat angled on the sofa while Fay lay back and spoke, telling her about the drugs, the rent. Fay looked pale and her hands twitched, pulling at her top and at the skin on her wrist.

'And then, Donall...'

Dia focused on Fay's face as her voice changed. Was that admiration?

'He just showed up, Dia, and he was different, not all anxious and terrified, he just knew what he was doing, right, even with my rent...'

It was almost affection, Dia thought, that lay behind Fay's words, some emotion she wasn't sharing. Why did she resent the possibility that Fay might, finally, be falling for Donall? Dia thought of Mary, her solid composure, her semblance of utter self-control. What would her own face look like if they started talking about her? And what was to come, with Mary? Was there something (finally) that she could look forward to?

'Did he, did Donall...' Dia fumbled the words. 'He didn't try anything on, did he?'

Fay looked vaguely shocked. 'No, I mean, come on,' she said. Dia continued to stare at her. 'No, hon, seriously, nothing like that, I mean, he held me a little, but...' She sniffed, then gave a wry laugh. 'I was a wee bit upset,' she said.

Dia grinned at the understatement. It was a relief to find a spark of the old Fay, the real Fay, underneath the pallor.

‘What will you do now?’ asked Dia.

Fay snorted. ‘No idea. Bum around and live off my mum for now. Not that that’s – oh, fuck, you know what I mean.’

‘Aye, it’s fine,’ Dia said, but she looked away all the same. She knew how Fay felt about her living at home, even though her separate flat wasn’t quite the same as living at home, even though she paid a bit of rent. The two of them had discussed it endlessly, before; Dia remembered defending herself, explaining about her savings, the flat she’d buy when she had enough. She had been starting to look around, too. Iain had been planning to come with her, give her advice. Now – well, it would be cheaper at least, since she didn’t want a sea view.

‘Is it cravings, you’ve had? Like -’

‘I’m not addicted,’ Fay said, grimacing into her tea. Dia nodded to show she believed her. ‘And I’m not mad, either. Donall believed my dream thing, too.’

‘What?’

‘You know, the dream about Iain.’

Dia froze up. She forced herself to lower her mug, slowly. Now she could clench her hands – almond, cherry blossom, white now at the knuckles – and ask what Fay meant.

‘Did Donall not tell you?’ Fay said. ‘Shit, he said he would, he said he’d call.’

This was the thing, the thing he hadn’t said. (Stupid, stupid – should have listened.) Dia felt like she was about to fall. She tried to hold on.

‘Well, fuck,’ Fay said. She took an anxious breath. ‘I had this dream, right, although we think it was more of a repressed memory, like something I knew but had forgotten, resurfacing. And it was a woman, someone in red, like me, but it *wasn’t* me, and she was standing behind Iain and smiling. It was an awful smile, Dia. And I didn’t know who she was, who else she could possibly be, but Donall thought, maybe, you know, that woman from the beach.’

Dia tried to speak, to say no, not Mary, you’ve made a mistake, but she couldn’t make a sound.

‘...said she’s still here, in the town, and -’

‘No,’ Dia managed, ‘not Mary, not, no...’

Fay blinked at her, silent.

‘How’s she Mary?’ Fay asked, another spark there, of disdain, confusion. ‘Dia? Dia, hey, I’m sorry. I thought you knew.’

But Dia was falling now, falling from a great height, and below were desperate waves. For a moment she lost perspective, and she couldn’t tell how far below they were, how big the breakers, how small the flecks of white; they could have been three feet away, or three thousand. It only lasted a second, and then she dragged herself back and focused on Fay’s face, full of concern. But Dia didn’t feel betrayed, at least not in the way Fay expected.

‘No, you don’t...’ She took a breath. ‘You shouldn’t believe your dreams, Fay, or put that onto Donall.’

‘But I *saw* her,’ said Fay. She sounded so earnest, so believing. Dia hardly recognised her. ‘I’m not saying that means he was, was *pushed*, you know, but there was *someone* there.’

‘No! No,’ Dia said, trying to stay calm. ‘You can’t have seen Mary. No one saw anyone. And Mary couldn’t have been on the boat. She, she couldn’t!’ The words were getting away from her, and she felt wild. She brushed a strand of hair away from her cheek and her fingertips came away damp. She was crying.

‘But she was found on the beach...’

‘No! No. How would she have got on the boat? How did no one see her?’ She saw Iain in her mind (gone – was he really gone?), Iain as he’d been before the party. His arms were opened to her, ready to hug. She’d gone to him, smiling in her painting clothes, and he’d pushed her away at the last moment, exaggerating his disgust for the smears of oil on her hands. She’d tried to wipe it on his too-expensive shirt, rolling her eyes at his protests. He’d darted away from her. And now -

‘I just don’t know who else it could have been,’ Fay said. Her anxious face wouldn’t let Dia be.

‘Not Mary,’ said Dia. ‘Probably no one.’ It couldn’t be true. She closed her eyes and focused on her certainty, on the fact that Fay had been high, that what she was

saying couldn't possibly be real. And she focused on Mary, too, Mary's hand calmly wiping away her tears, Mary's mouth warm on hers. Mary was good, Mary was good to her. She knew she could judge, because if she couldn't, if she'd lost her judgement she'd be floating in that perspectiveless sea, no right or wrong or truth or lies. (And what if -)

Dia picked up her mug, focusing on her hand to keep it steady. She would have to leave, after this. She wanted to get back to Mary.

Donall was going through all the evidence. He had only read the missing persons report six months ago. It had felt like enough, then, but he had been distracted by his grief, and then by K. He had trusted his colleagues. Now, he went through everything. He started with the photographs, some forensic, some taken from camera phones. They'd been mapped before by time and place but Donall went through them again, methodically going through every blur, every smudge of red and trying to map it onto the boat, the party. They'd only been looking for Iain before; now Donall tracked anything red. There was Fay's red dress, and Fay herself, beautiful under the lights. She danced, she drank, she pulled faces. Donall tried to find another spot of brightness, something else to focus on, but no one else was wearing that colour.

As he followed the photographs later into the night they became blurred, and red-orange smears appeared at the edges as people's fingers got in the way or they moved mid-shot. The images barely stung, now, after so long. Perhaps they would return at night to haunt him, but for now he was numb. Some of the blurs could have been a person; in one he thought he could see the shadow of legs. But Fay wasn't in that picture, so it might have been her; it could have been nothing. It was just a shadow of possibility. He wasn't even sure where on the boat the picture had been taken.

Donall rubbed his face. He'd found nothing in the photographs, nothing that showed, definitively, that someone they hadn't accounted for had been on that boat. The names on the manifest had all checked out as well. That didn't mean no one else had been there, but it made it very unlikely. He wanted to believe Fay, but what if there was no evidence? He tried to get away from that thought. There would be something. He could finish tomorrow, going through the statements, the search reports. He was

sure he would find something unexplained.

When Dia arrived home, Mary was out.

‘I think she’s got a gig,’ Karen said when Dia, tentatively, asked. Dia went to bed, disappointed. She wondered how to approach Mary and ask her out (was that what she wanted?) when they lived, essentially, in the same building.

When she slept, she dreamed of horses, wild and cantering in the shadows.

That night, in church, Donall tried to ask the only person who knew the truth. ‘Was it her?’ he whispered into the gloom. ‘Was it something other than an accident?’

Iain answered, of course. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘that woman pushed me, all in red.’ Donall blinked. Iain shifted, changed. ‘No,’ he said, shaking his head sadly, ‘I just – I just fell in, Donall. I shouldn’t have tried to sit on the railing. It was daft.’

Donall stopped the day-dream before he could make Iain say, ‘I’m sorry.’ He felt his eyes start to fill. He was making it up. What if Fay was too? If only there were something, something he could see. He wasn’t ready to take the lack of evidence as positive proof. It wasn’t enough. He wanted something more concrete than an absence. He wanted to know for sure.

In the morning he went back over every statement, even his own. They were a mess of drunken uncertainty and imprecision; nobody remembered timings or locations. Donall read and re-read them, trying to construct the timeline from scratch. He came up with the same list as the case officers: no one had seen Iain after midnight, but no one had been worried about him. They had assumed he’d gone to bed, that he was with another group. No one had considered anything worse. They’d said things like, ‘I thought I saw him crossing the deck,’ or, ‘there was somebody by the railings, but wasn’t that Tom?’ Donall cross-referenced their statements, but they didn’t mesh. There could have been an extra person waiting by the edge, a shadow that didn’t belong. Then again, there could have been nothing.

Donall sat back, sighing. There wasn’t enough. He still had no reason to give credence to Fay’s vision. An extra person couldn’t have got on and off the boat, anyway.

‘Don.’ It was Amy.

‘Mm?’ He tried to drag his thoughts back from Mary lying on the beach, battered, broken, all but dead. Amy was glaring at his desktop.

‘Any progress on the homeless cases?’ was all she said. ‘You know there was another last week.’

‘Aye,’ he said, trying to focus, ‘I did the paperwork. But there’s nothing we can do without a body. They’ve probably just wandered off. If they’d died of exposure we’d know. It’s hardly cold enough yet.’

‘Still, the shelter are worried. We’ve got to take it seriously.’

‘I can go over the files again if you want, see if there’s any links.’

Amy nodded. ‘Focus on now, Donall,’ she said.

She wanted him to give up, like they’d done six months ago.

Dia didn’t see Mary in the morning, or when she came home from work. She was just about to go out to her studio for the evening when she heard a knock at her door. She opened it, and Mary greeted her with a soft smile.

‘Would you like to go for a walk?’ Mary sounded almost nervous.

Dia laughed in surprise. ‘Now?’ It was not quite dark: the streetlights glowed orange although the sky was still the colour of pale stone. When she had been a child, her parents had always told her to be home by dark, but in these transitional seasons, darkness was relative.

‘It is still early,’ Mary said. She smiled.

Dia searched her face for anything sinister, anything false. (Ridiculous.) ‘Sure,’ she said, ‘let’s do it.’ It seemed transgressive; a thrill. Perhaps that was just the feeling of being with Mary. And they couldn’t be true, the things Fay had said. They set out the way Dia had always gone, out the back door and down the grassy slope to the path. Mary was right: it was still light enough to see by, light enough to see the pale strip of path at the bottom of the grass, between it and -

Dia stopped. What was she doing? It was there: the sea. Her heartbeat should have been racing with panic, but she felt almost calm. Mary was strong beside her.

‘I did not expect you would want to go this way,’ Mary said.

‘Me neither,’ said Dia, with a strangled laugh. ‘I didn’t even mean to come down here, but...’ She took a breath. ‘It’s okay. As long as we don’t go onto the actual beach, or anything.’ And she continued along the path. Maybe it was a good change, she thought. And besides, Mary was there, walking carefully along the outside of the path, closer to the sea.

‘So how was your day?’ Dia said. (Idiot.) She just wanted to fill her mind with something other than where they were going, with Fay’s crazy delusions.

‘I played music,’ Mary said. ‘The Ragweed Nags have a gig this weekend, and I am not ready yet. I still have a few parts to learn properly.’

‘You’ll do great,’ said Dia, beaming.

‘You should come hear us play some time,’ Mary said. Her voice was soft.

‘You think?’ Dia said. ‘It’s not really my kind of music.’

‘I think you will like it.’

‘We’ll see,’ said Dia. As they went downhill they were getting closer and closer to the beach. Dia wondered if they should turn back; no, she decided, she would manage, with Mary there.

‘How was your friend, yesterday?’ Mary asked. Dia glanced at her. She couldn’t tell her, could she, about the suspicion, the awful accusation.

‘Fay?’ she said. ‘Not great.’ Dia shivered in the breeze as she told Mary what had brought Fay back. ‘It must be awful for her, having to leave everything she’d built up like that.’

‘She has returned for some time, then?’

‘I guess.’

Mary turned her attention away from the salt air and the breeze to consider this. It would change Dianaimh’s relations with the world to have this bubbly, successful friend around again. Except, of course, she was not so successful any more.

‘I’m actually really worried about her,’ said Dianaimh. There was something hidden and serious in her tone that made Mary wish for once that it was lighter, that she could scrutinise the face of her new lover – if that is what they were to be.

‘She got this, these *ideas*, and she’s started believing her dreams.’

‘That is disturbing,’ said Mary. ‘Does she think they actually happened?’

‘Yes. She’s totally convinced herself, and Donall.’ Dia stopped. Mary didn’t need to hear all of this. It was so petty, so unbelievable. And it wasn’t true, either. ‘Sorry for venting at you,’ she said. ‘I’m sure Fay’ll be fine.’

‘I do not mind,’ said Mary.

At the bottom of the hill the path ran parallel to the beach, just a short step away from it across a foot of sandy grass. There, Mary stopped. Dia remembered (and it was so self-centred, not to think of it before) that Mary had far more reason than Dia did to be afraid of the beach.

‘Is this – is this all right?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ said Mary. She turned. How far could she push this moment? The sea was so close, the salt air sharp and vital in her nose and mouth. She wanted to run through it, to hurl her body forward and swim through the wet air. She wanted to be part of that harsh ocean spray.

‘What did Fay dream?’ she asked instead.

Dia hesitated. ‘Oh, nothing,’ she said. It sounded unconvincing even to her, her voice wavering. It was stupid, to lie. She shouldn’t lie to Mary.

‘You can tell me,’ said Mary. ‘I will not mind.’

Dia remembered Mary’s distaste at being watched in town. This would be so much worse for her. But she should know, shouldn’t she? Knowing would mean she was prepared, she could fight the lies, the allegations, if that was what they became. She took a breath.

‘She dreamed something about Iain.’

‘Oh?’ This was not what Mary had expected. It explained why Dianaimh had been so uneasy, however.

‘It – she thinks she saw him fall,’ Dia said, lamely. ‘She thinks there was someone watching him, someone behind him who might, might have pushed him.’ She shivered. She could hear the waves rushing on the beach. (Were they drawing closer?)

‘But that is terrible!’ Mary said. She reached out and put a hand on Dianaimh’s

arm. Her mind throbbed. It was an unexpected challenge, this conversation, and so close to the sea.

Dia felt the tears coming. It had become acceptable, somehow, to cry in front of this woman. Mary made her feel safe, made the wringing out of her emotions seem reasonable and okay. (And the waves, the waves were here, rising.) Mary held her, secure on the path. Dia relaxed into her strong arms and sobbed. It would be okay, wouldn't it, to tell her, to let her know?

Mary listened to Dianaimh's sobs, holding her. 'Dianaimh,' she breathed, 'Dianaimh, it is okay.' There were words under the sobs but she could not understand them. 'What are you saying?'

'It was *you*, they think -' Dianaimh hiccupped and Mary watched, waiting for the words to come. 'They think it was you, behind Iain, they think you were there, they -'

Mary's face changed, and Dia saw, for a moment, the depth of her rage. Dia shivered under her angry stare, frozen, until Mary turned away. She strode out towards the ocean, and Dia thought she was going to keep walking into the sea, disappearing as suddenly as she'd arrived. Dia wanted to reach out to her, to grab her and pull her back. Before she realised it she had moved forwards and was standing on wet sand. Was it really so momentous? It was such a small step, and it wasn't the beach that connected her to her brother, it was the roaring ocean beyond it. Still, there was something about this place. Even in the half-dark Dia could pick out the flecks of brown and tan and eggshell, the multitude of colours which gave her pause. But Mary – she was still striding on ahead of her, across the dirty ridge of seaweed and debris that marked the tide line. The tide was out, but beyond that line the ground was only pretending; it could shift at any moment. She knew there would be hours before the tide encroached, before the treacherous, grasping waters crept up, but still (idiotically) she was panicky, close to tears.

'Mary,' she called, 'I don't believe them!' The wind must have snatched her voice. Mary didn't turn. 'I'm sorry,' she said, 'I'm sorry.' She bent her head to wipe her face on her sleeve, to calm herself, and when she looked up again she couldn't see Mary. She stared around at the twilight, but she was – she was gone. Dia started to run, wildly

calling her name, crossing that awful tide line because she had to, she had to explain that she didn't believe it, that she didn't want to lose Mary, or have her be angry. As her feet trod down on the unsolid ground that was really the sea, it stayed firm. It didn't give way beneath her. Finally, she saw Mary, standing straight beside the surf. As she reached Mary, Dia slowed. She was here, across the tide line. And she was all right.

'Mary,' she said, breathless, 'Mary, I'm sorry. I didn't want to tell you, I *know* it's not true, but...I don't know what they'll do, if they really think...'

Mary stayed rigid, staring into the distance. She was not ready yet.

Dia knew she'd hurt her. She wanted to smooth away Mary's anger, to make her smile again, but she didn't know how. Instead she followed Mary's gaze and, as if for the first time, saw the sea. It was full of colours, so many Dia could hardly map them: white, and ivory, and steel, dusky blue and aquamarine. She couldn't look away. A wave was building, higher than before yet so calm-looking; like a blue-grey sheet flapping out across a bed. But Dia couldn't ignore the quiet force beneath that drove it forward. She watched it rise, and rise, holding her breath until, cresting, it broke into white flecks, turned on itself in a smooth curl, and fell crashing to the earth. She jumped backwards as the bubbly dribble the wave had been reduced to raced towards her trainers, trying to grab her with its last bit of momentum. Once she was moving she couldn't stop. She turned and ran until she was safe beyond the tide mark.

As Dianaimh turned and fled, Mary returned to life. She should not have let herself lose control like that, particularly not in front of Dianaimh. She followed her, reluctantly, away from the water, catching up to her at the edge of the beach. Dianaimh was crying, and Mary pulled her close. She had to make up for the way she had run away.

'I'm sorry,' Dia said, her voice trembling with sobs. 'I'm sorry, I didn't -'

'Shh,' Mary said, holding her, stroking her back the way she knew Dianaimh liked.

And Dia let go. She let herself cry, for Mary, for Fay and Donall, but also for herself, for her loneliness. The loss of Iain was an ache, a constant ache like the pull of the current. She was tired of hurting. Her head nestled in Mary's shoulder, she looked,

again, at the sea. She had gone towards it, felt that huge presence, and then retreated. Was that enough? It felt like progress. She watched the waves moving inwards, each great surge forwards pulling away into failure, and yet the tide came in.

Her sobs ebbed, and Dia pulled away from Mary, taking shaky, full breaths. She didn't want to meet the other woman's eyes but Mary put a firm finger beneath her chin and raised it up. Mary's dark eyes were full of care, perhaps of love.

'I was not there,' Mary said.

'I know,' Dia said, wiping her face, recovering. 'You couldn't have been. That's what I told them.'

'Somebody else would have remembered me, even if I could not.'

'Aye, exactly,' Dia said (and the relief was like the tide, receding). 'But her and Donall...' She shook her head. 'It's just so unexpected. Fay's never believed in anything weird before, not even God, like Donall does. I guess it could just be the drugs...I don't know, I never really did any of that.'

Mary, too, thought of Donall. He seemed to be everywhere. And now he had this woman, Fay, under his spell. 'If Fay has been high that might explain her delusions,' she said out loud.

'Aye, that must be it,' said Dia. 'Look, I'm sorry about, about all that craziness.'

'It is all right,' Mary said. 'You do not have to worry.' She stroked Dianaimh's hair. 'We should go back.'

Dia nodded, looking up at her. It was darker now, and Mary's features were obscured. They seemed to be shifting, changing in the shadows, as if there were other faces just under the surface of her. Dia could just see her teeth glinting, their whiteness a stable point in the murk. She raised her face to Mary's, feeling once again that she was falling. But this time, Mary would catch her. Dia let herself fall and Mary kissed her, fierce and urgent in the dark.

That night, Donall paced his room. K wasn't online. She'd left a video message for him instead, a recording, but Donall barely watched it. He couldn't settle. Closing his laptop, he took out his phone. It was unusual to be able to call Fay without scorn or

censure. He didn't quite believe it, just as he didn't quite believe the evidence of drugs he'd found at her flat.

She answered immediately. 'I'm glad you called,' she said, and Donall felt his breath catch in spite of himself. 'Did you find anything?' she asked.

'No,' he said. 'There's nothing, nothing at all.'

'Fuck.' She sounded defeated.

'That doesn't mean it didn't happen, just that we can't prove it or do anything about it.' He paused. 'I'm sorry.'

'It's not your fault,' she said. 'I just – I told Dia about it yesterday. I thought she knew, but...'

'She wouldn't let me tell her,' Donall said. Another thing he'd failed to protect Fay from. 'She hung up on me after I told her about you. I guess she came straight over?'

'Yeah.' Fay sighed. Donall loved talking to her, her living, breathing self, after all the time he'd spent watching her online.

'You know Dia's into her?'

'What?'

'Mary. I think they're close.'

Donall didn't reply. Fay could hear him breathing through the phone and wondered what he was thinking. He might not even still believe her. She wondered if she should tell him about all the research she had done, the missing persons, the bodies – the folklore.

'How close?' Donall said.

'I don't know. But she was totally not buying the vision thing. Wouldn't hear a word against Mary.'

Donall grinned as he heard Fay scoff at her name. He felt close to her again in agreement. He let himself wonder, for a moment, what would happen next. If there could, really, be anything between them. But he remembered the drugs in her room, her gaunt face.

'Do you think she really did anything?' Fay asked. It was such a small thing, but

Donall loved to hear her ask his opinion; she actually cared what he thought.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘It seems so fantastical. I mean, she couldn’t have got on the boat, not without being noticed. And – why? Why would she do that?’

Fay didn’t respond. She had been so sure of her dream, her vision, whatever it was. The woman smiling, the man falling, splashing, and finally disappearing – she’d been so certain it was real, but she could hear in Donall’s voice that he didn’t believe it.

‘I don’t know,’ he said after a while. ‘I just don’t think she could’ve been involved. I mean, I do feel like there’s something off about her, you know? But it’s probably just the amnesia. That would make a person seem odd. And if Dia likes her...’

‘Aye, I guess,’ said Fay. ‘It’s probably fine.’

Later, when she had led Dianaimh up the uneven path and kissed her goodnight on the steps of her flat, Mary remembered the sea. She knew what Dianaimh had felt, before those waves. She had felt it too. But she was not overwhelmed. She understood the ocean’s power, and she loved it. She loved it passionately, unconditionally: like it was home.

9: settling

Dia wanted to understand the weird music Mary played; it might help her get to know Mary better. When she played in the pub there was an audience, she'd said, a few people who drank and listened. Dia could go, surprise her. She would like that, wouldn't she?

As Dia pushed open the door she took in the old-fashioned colours: brass and polished wood, rich reds and dark upholstery. She bought a drink and took it into the back room. The music had already started; she was late. (Thoughtless.) Dia found a seat, hoping Mary wouldn't mind, and watched. The old man – Campbell, Mary had called him – he was smiling. He seemed to be in charge. The others, even Mary, looked to him at the change of a tune or the start of a new rhythm. The small, red-haired woman and the energetic drummer looked normal enough for folkies, but Mary, in comparison, seemed sleek and beautiful.

Dia hadn't expected much of the music. She'd sniggered like everyone else at the Scottish traditional stuff they'd had to listen to in school music classes, but when the

Nags played it sounded unearthly. No, Dia realised, as the music lowered and changed: it was earthly music, grounded and old, as if it were ancient enough to feel magical. And it suited Mary. She seemed at home with these people, with this music; the rhythms of it were as much part of her as that glinting silver necklace she always wore. Dia wondered if she could paint her murky beauty, the way it came alive with the melody. But Mary was too fluid, too fast. To paint her Dia would have to stop her, and take her spark out. That wouldn't be right.

The tune swooped and leaped to a finish, and Dia clapped with the others in the audience, truly enthusiastic. Mary turned, noticing her, and Dia basked in her flushed, triumphant smile. I could paint that part of her, she thought. She ran a hand through her hair, catching a strand and twisting it around and around as she responded to Mary's gaze.

Mary turned back to the music. It had been unexpected to see Dianaimh in the audience, just another punter drawn to their group. They never articulated why they came, what drew them to the dark pub, the bewitching music, but the room was always full of eager faces. Mary was not sure she liked that Dianaimh was watching, noticing how she interacted with Campbell and the others. But when the night ended and they were packing away their instruments, Dianaimh approached, full of admiration. They walked back to the Creagmuir together.

'I can't believe your band is called the Ragweed Nags,' Dia said. 'It's such a – I don't know. Where's it come from, the name?' She couldn't quite see Mary properly. She was just a mass of shadows.

'I believe it comes from a poem called the Address to the Deil,' said Mary. She smiled in the gloom. 'It is a fancy of Campbell's.'

'I guess it fits a folk band,' Dia said.

Mary heard the edge of scorn in Dianaimh's voice, the way she emphasised the word *folk*. These people did not like traditional music, or they did not think they did; Dianaimh had obviously enjoyed herself that evening.

As they reached her door Dia turned to say, 'come in?' She didn't make an excuse, offer tea or something stronger. They both knew she was offering herself. Mary shut the

door behind her, grabbing Dia's hand as she reached for the light switch, keeping her in the dark. Dia let herself be pushed with a tender assertiveness, first against the wall and then down, down onto her bed. She closed her eyes and relished in the sensations: the caress of fingers, the flick of a tongue. She let herself be carried away by the tide of pleasure, and felt herself relax.

Mary, too, relaxed somewhat. This was so close to being perfect. She was safe, well-fed, and had this delicious woman doing her bidding in the cold dark of winter. But it was not quite enough. As the sounds of their lovemaking rose and fell, she was aware of how far their noises would carry: the Machlins were only a few metres away through the walls. Mary wanted to be free enough to have a private space, somewhere no one could watch or overhear. Looking down at Dianaimh, still now beneath her, Mary wondered if she would be able to persuade her to move.

Winter was bleak, by the sea, but Fay was, strangely, not desperate to leave. She liked seeing Dia more, and her mum, but it wasn't just that. She felt like there was something left unfinished, that she couldn't leave again yet. Perhaps it was the uncertainty over her dream, over Mary; maybe she was still not really over Iain. It didn't seem to matter, especially when she found work: the shopping centre had wanted Christmas elves with acting experience. On her first day, Fay got into her red and green costume with loathing. She'd made herself up convincingly, enough to hide how little she wanted to be there, but she wished she could just be herself.

'Going out later?' one of her colleagues asked as she fastened her pointy, garish hat.

'Not tonight,' Fay replied. She was trying, really trying, to stop drinking and partying, to face the world rather than avoiding it.

'At least have a wee drink?' another elf said, flashing a hip flask. Fay shook her head, wondering how long it would take for her to stop refusing. The job was just like the Glasgow cafe: boring, demeaning, surrounded by younger, happier people. And as December went on people she'd known from school were starting to get in touch, asking why she was back, how her life was going. There would be meet-ups nearer to

Christmas, and the annual Christmas Eve pub trip which she usually avoided. A whole night of catch-up conversations: what are you doing with your life? How much success have you had? And she didn't know if Dia would go, now she was so wrapped up in Mary. They weren't seeing each other as much as Fay had expected.

Finally, she gave up. It was so easy to slip back into the rhythm of planning parties at work to get through the day and drinking to get through the night. They went out as a group, first to bars and then to somebody's house. A guy she'd never seen before was offering pills; Fay gave him less cash than they were worth and took them gratefully. She sank back into the high like a feather bed.

'Worth the elf work for this, eh?' said one of her colleagues.

'Totally,' Fay replied, spreading her arms to dance.

The party ended too soon for her. She found herself out in the street wanting more pills. The magic was wearing off already, and she didn't want to lose it. She was sure it had lasted longer before. She walked past the cheap Christmas decorations, and saw a group, loitering. Automatically, she sped up. Even if they were the people to ask, they leered too much for her to risk stopping. She kept on wandering and wanting. It wasn't addiction; she just liked the feeling of being high. Near the music shop, a shadow detached itself from a corner and made itself visible. Fay grinned to herself. This was the game she knew. She slowed, and the figure watched her. She stopped, took out a cigarette, and asked for a light. The man was wearing a large, dark hoodie and running shoes. At least, she assumed it was a man. She couldn't see his face.

Fay waited, smoking in silence until the figure spoke. His voice was low but clear, and the transaction went smoothly. Finally, Fay thought.

'You here regularly?' she asked. The figure shrugged, but Fay saw the gleam of a smile in the dark.

On the third Sunday in Advent, another candle was lit in church, and Donall listened to John preach about forgiveness. He would forgive, he told himself. He would forgive his friends for not being there. It was natural, he thought, that Dia would drop off a little like this, after Fay had come home. But still, he missed their coffees and drinks, the easy

friendship they'd developed after school had ended and they'd been the ones to stay. He would make sure to see more of her in the new year. Fay hadn't been in touch either, since they'd had that talk about Mary, but he'd never really been in contact with her. She and Dia were probably seeing each other loads, he thought. They don't need me butting in.

John was still speaking. We will all sin, he said, we will all be tempted by the Devil. Satan came in all shapes and guises, not a cloven-footed monster but an impulse, a decision, a set of behaviours. It was important to forgive our own trespasses, he said, to forgive ourselves for our moments of weakness, and to decide instead to build on them and change that behaviour. We had to make the conscious choice to stand with Jesus, to stand in the light.

Donall felt his heart contract. He had been thinking of other people, not of himself. Now K and his own sins filled his mind. The things they did together didn't always feel sinful, but now, in church, Donall felt his face warm. He shouldn't be letting himself treat her like that – he shouldn't even want to. He should find somebody in real life, someone who would distract him from his darker wants, who might even eradicate them. K was just an online presence; she might even be a figment of his imagination, a digital creation by somebody out to mock him.

As the congregation stood for the final hymn, Donall looked at the windows. He willed the December gloom to lift and the sunlight to shine, as if that would be a sign of forgiveness, or of God. Donall bowed his head as the music continued, praying. He prayed for himself, to make himself better; and he asked God to help Fay and Dia find their way, without knowing exactly what he meant. Then he paused. Should he pray for Mary? There was something unchristian about her, something pagan, but Dia was with her now. And Donall was hardly being a good Christian himself these days. He tried to include her in his supplication.

The service ended, and the others filed out. Donall remained in his seat. He needed an extra moment of silence, alone in the sanctuary; he wanted to talk to Iain. He closed his eyes and pictured his friend, far away and smiling as usual, but he found that he no longer trusted him. Iain was a mirage he had conjured up, a construct who simply

agreed with him, and said what Donall wanted to hear. He was no different to K, really – an actor, an outlet for his unhealthy fantasies. He didn't think he could give either of them up.

His phone buzzed. There were work emails: something about the new drug dealer they were trying to track, some guy who was apparently working alone. But the newest message was from Fay. Was he going to the pub on Christmas Eve, she asked, with the old group from school? Donall could read the unease behind her casual language. He replied, saying yes. He hoped Fay would come too. Then he would get to see her, to see how she was. He tried to push it away, but the thought glowed in him.

On Christmas Eve, Dia paced her flat. She shouldn't have been scared; she was going to be with Mary. But she hadn't seen most of these people since the party on the boat. They'd talk about it, she knew.

'Is this okay to wear, do you think?' she asked Mary, smoothing her work clothes. She was hoping for reassurance.

'I do not know,' Mary said, tilting her head to one side. Dia pushed herself into Mary's warm body. Here, encircled by Mary's strength, Dia felt safe.

'I don't know what else I could wear,' she mumbled.' Mary gently pushed her away.

'I could choose something for you, if you like.'

'Oh,' said Dia. 'Sure! What kind –'

But Mary was already leafing through her wardrobe, finding something suitable. Dia felt herself relax. Mary would sort everything out.

The bar was new: slate grey walls, chrome tables. Dia led Mary towards her friends, towards Alice and Andrew and Stuart and all the others. Fay looked nervous, but she'd done herself up well. Dia couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her; they'd both been busy with work. (Was that the reason?) She glanced at Mary, and Mary squeezed her arm in encouragement. Then she plunged in, introducing Mary to the others, surprised at how easily she spoke and grinned. She only hesitated when one of them

asked, 'and where did you find her, then?' Luckily, Mary took over.

'I do not know,' she said, with a smile. 'I lost my memory after an accident.'

They made Mary tell the story. She did it with relish, Dia noticed, without any hesitation. She had healed, had learned. (She'd done better than Dia.) She seemed totally at home. Dia stared at the table, its chrome dividing into patches of brightness and darkness, where it held a reflection.

'Hey,' said Fay, her voice low. 'How are things?' She nodded towards Mary. Dia considered. Fay's face was open, genuine – but she knew the suspicion that lurked behind it.

'Things are good,' she said. 'Like, really good.'

Fay watched light come into her friend's face, and marvelled.

'Mary's just...I feel so safe with her, you know? Like she's always going to look out for me.'

'Always?' Fay's tone was sharper than she'd meant it to be.

'Well, you know what I mean.' Dia had folded back into herself, and Fay didn't know what to say to reach out to her. She didn't seem interested in what was going on around her, even when, just after Donall arrived, somebody mentioned Iain. She simply slid off her stool and disappeared into the bathroom. Fay looked at Mary, wondering which of them was going to follow her, comfort her. Mary eyed her for a moment, thumbing that silver pendant of hers. Fay couldn't read her, couldn't get past her surface; Mary, too, knew how to present herself with skill.

'I will just make sure she is all right,' she said, and walked away. Fay scowled after her.

'Aye, a service would be the thing, wouldn't it?' Donall's voice made her turn. He wasn't looking at her.

'Maybe at the anniversary?' Stuart was saying. 'I can't believe it's been almost a year.'

'Yeah. Or his birthday – March, wasn't it?' That was Alice.

'The 20th,' said Donall. 'Have to ask Dia – where'd she go?'

'She's just in the loo,' said Fay. She wanted to join in, to be part of the group, but

she wasn't sure she had the energy. She thought about the pills in her pocket, but Donall caught her eye, greeting her with a lift of his head. He'd know, she thought. And he's police.

'And what are you up to these days, Fay?' Here it came, she thought, turning to face Danny, wondering what she could say. 'Still in Glasgow?' he asked.

'No,' she said, 'I'm back here now.' She tried to look cheerful, but she knew he'd keep asking.

Donall saw her face fall, that beautiful smile fade away. 'Here, does anyone want a drink?' he asked suddenly, touching Danny's arm. He saw Fay turn away behind him and, in the confusion over the round, the rest of Danny's question went unanswered. At the bar Donall congratulated himself. He'd never been the guy who smoothed over social awkwardness before.

Fay escaped outside, wondering if Donall had saved her from that question deliberately. It would come back, she knew, but it was a nice gesture. Nice, and unexpected. She'd noticed the same confidence in him tonight as he'd had during that awful weekend in Glasgow. He could take charge of a situation; he could make you feel safe. She would have to thank him later.

Inside, the seats had shuffled around. Donall was next to Dia now, and Mary had had to find a seat opposite. Fay grinned into her drink and slipped in at the end of the table.

'What do you think, then, Dia, about having a memorial service for your brother?' Donall asked quietly.

Dia froze. She wished they'd stop asking her about him. There was a barrier between her and that misery now that shimmered, keeping her safe. She didn't want to have to break through it for the sake of conversation. Iain was far away. She didn't want to talk about him any more. She glanced at Mary, who gave her a warm smile. At least Mary was having a good time; at least she'd met everybody now. But Donall still expected Dia to say something. 'I don't know,' was all she managed. Someone else butted in, suggesting dates for this service.

'Do you mean a – a funeral?' she said, or thought she said. Nobody seemed to

hear her. Dia shivered. Something had released inside her, at the thought. Was it relief she was feeling now, or terror? Why couldn't she tell? (Was she that thick, that stupid?)

Donall watched as Mary signalled Dia that it was time to leave. Dia looked happy – relieved, almost – to go with her. She followed Mary out eagerly, like a puppy on an invisible lead. It was faintly disgusting, the way couples often were. But it made Donall think of K, of how it would look if he treated her in the real world the way he treated her online. Could he ever really go through with it, making his fantasies a reality? He wasn't sure he even wanted to. They were just that: fantastical, unreal.

Now it had been suggested, Dia was surprised that it hadn't already happened. Funerals were what you had, weren't they, when somebody died. (How much less the word hurt, now.) She wondered what her parents would think.

On Christmas day Dia set the table as always. They always had a meal just the four of them before seeing the rest of the extended family, but, today, Dia wasn't sure which place to leave empty. She turned to her mother and Karen pulled her to her, crying into her shoulder. Her dad appeared and, when he realised what was happening, frowned in silent sympathy. Dia didn't cry. She felt numb in her mother's embrace.

'Why don't we have a service for him?' Her voice seemed to come from elsewhere.

'A funeral, you mean?' Craig asked.

'Just something to remember,' she said. Her mum dried her eyes, and Dia could see the idea taking root.

'That would be...' Karen simply beamed.

Dia glanced behind her, then stopped. She'd been looking for Iain, to catch his eye and grin to say see, didn't that go well? But he wasn't there. Nobody was there. Dia thought of Mary instead: her chocolate hair, her dark eyes. She had gone to spend the day with some people she knew through her band, and she would be back late, she'd said. Dia wished she was here, wished she'd had the courage to suggest that she spend Christmas with them. Perhaps next year, she thought with a thrill.

All these winter festivals were so tame, Mary thought. Christmas – Yule – was just the

solstice dressed up in different clothes, sedate and calm. And another was approaching: the new year, Hogmanay. It would be another half-festival, lamed through its adherence to rules and social norms. She had a gig lasting late into the night, but she could not imagine these people celebrating in any real sense.

She was surprised. People set off fireworks, whooping when they exploded high in the sky. They danced recklessly, raucously, with everybody they met. Some of them even ran into the sea, screaming at the icy cold and emerging wild-eyed and new. Mary smiled at that. It was a tradition she understood; it felt old, and true.

At her gig she played, well into the new day and the new year. The band were slick and together, now they knew the music and each other, and they played with devilish fire. The tunes leapt and pounded, and Mary watched the dancers moving to her rhythm, faster and faster, hardly noticing the band forcing them to speed up as they turned and swung. She caught Campbell's eye and he winked above his pipes. This power was what they played for.

The rush tingled through her long afterwards. It was not the heavy molten temper she often felt but light, billowing energy. She walked home with Dianaimh, barely listening to what she said, hearing only her own blood pumping, the roar of the sea. She felt wild, wilder than the winds whipping Dianaimh's hair up into a cloud of gold, wilder even than the waves. And tonight...if these people could let go, could caper in the streets and drench themselves in the bay, she could too. Mary let go.

She pulled Dianaimh off the road, dragging her into the undergrowth above the beach in a rage of delight. She did not have a plan. She simply wanted to fuck. It would be a celebration in an older style; a ritual in its own right. She pushed Dianaimh to the hard frosty ground and watched as she lay, uncertain and vulnerable. Her hands rested where they'd fallen, beside her head, as she waited for Mary to begin. Mary smiled.

Dia did as she was bidden, kissing and licking enthusiastically in the cold dirt, trying to ignore the sounds of the waves which (pathetic) still set her on edge. People walked past, not far away by the road, laughing and shouting to each other. Dia stopped, petrified, but Mary's hand snaked up Dia's exposed, cold body, and Dia relented, arching her back in response and telling herself she was enjoying this. She had

to wait a long time for Mary's energy to abate, but afterwards, as she pulled her clothes back on, Mary looked happy and relaxed. Dia was shivering with cold, but Mary deserved this. She'd come so far, made such an effort to get involved in the town. And it was Hogmanay; Dia should lighten up. Maybe back at home, in the warmth and relative privacy of her flat, it would be Dia's turn to enjoy herself.

That was why they were out here, Dia realised, as she scrambled up to follow Mary back to the road. They needed their own space. At the B&B her parents were always there, watching their interactions. It was so obvious: she should start looking at flats again. Mary was getting paid well for her music, and she would easily be able to contribute to a mortgage. Dia should have known, should have paid attention enough to know that that was what Mary wanted. She would make it up to her, she'd make it right. They could move in together, she thought. It would be a wonderful way to start the new year.

January went on, and Mary ran every night, breathing in the icy sea air. These people thought the winter had ended at the solstice, at Yule, and they celebrated the fact. It was true that the light was returning, slow and weak, but the shadow of winter would be with them for months.

The visits from Jamie the social worker were finally dwindling.

'You're progressing really well,' he told her, beaming. 'I think you're ready to be signed off.'

'Thank you,' she said. It made them less nervous if she spoke, she had found. This time it did not take long to make him leave. There would be no more checkups, and her mind would no longer be probed. Dianaimh, too, was getting closer to her, more loving and useful by the day. They lay on Dianaimh's bed in the half-light, listening to the rain battering the windows, and Mary stroked Dianaimh's cheek, enjoying the sight of her body spread out before her.

Dia stretched, rolling away from Mary's warm body to turn onto her elbow. She had made her decision.

'I've been thinking of buying a flat,' she said. Mary looked up at her, alert. 'I was

all set to do it before Iain, you know, and I – I thought it was time to start looking again.’

‘Are you sure?’ said Mary, keeping her voice slightly surprised, her body still. Was it really going to be so easy?

‘Yeah, I am,’ Dianaimh said. ‘And -’

Mary watched the interplay of nerves and excitement in Dianaimh’s face, and stroked her thigh. She was working up to it. The words would come.

‘Would you want to come with me?’ she said at last. Mary hid her smile of triumph with a kiss.

‘I would love to,’ she said. Dianaimh’s eyes were bright. Her hair caught the lamplight and shone.

‘I know it’s fast, right, but it makes sense – at least, to me,’ she said, stroking Mary’s cheek. ‘I guess I just don’t see why not. I think it would have to be my place, you know, legally, but I’ve got the savings for somewhere decent. You can, like, pay me rent, or something. Unless you -’

‘It is a wonderful idea,’ Mary said. She hoped she did not sound too enthusiastic. But Dianaimh’s face was glowing, and her body pressed into Mary’s. Mary was triumphant. She was no longer being checked on by anyone, she had money, and music. Soon she would have privacy too, a hideaway from all those watchful eyes. Only Dianaimh would be with her, there, and Dianaimh, too, was different.

For the first time since she had come out of the water, Mary felt truly free.

10: crossing over

Fay was unemployed again. After her seasonal work dried up, she found nothing else going in the bleak new year. She looked, trawling the internet and adverts at the library, sending out CVs and half-arsed cover letters. Often she gave up, preferring to read, to lose herself in stories. They were all so doubled, the creatures she read about. The faeries, the *sidh*, seduced and claimed you, but could also kill you; the kelpie either drowned you, eating your body apart from the liver, or ensnared you, keeping you as its lover, blind to its evil. Fay preferred the seduction stories, the people made oblivious by magic. It was what she still wanted, after all, what she aimed for when she reached the bottom of the bottles she'd started hiding from her mother, the bags of pills she bought from the man in the shadows. If only there really were some Otherworld... She pushed the thought away, remembering her dream and how it had come to nothing.

Her phone buzzed. Some of the Christmas elves were meeting up again. Fay knew she shouldn't go. It was February now: they should all have moved on. But she did

herself up and went out, hoping for relaxation, for distraction. It was a loud, dark party, with pills and drinks which were made with something stronger than just alcohol. Fay shed her anxiety, her failures, and laughed with strangers, dancing and kissing and twirling from one person to another. This was a kind of freedom, she thought; this was what she wanted.

Donall had started working with the young people at church again. He felt sick doing it, knowing what he did for fun, the things he imagined with K, but John had kept asking in his gentle, pressing way, and eventually Donall had had to say yes. He organised games and snacks and let them play music. It wasn't so bad. It was good for him to get out of the house and out of himself. It got him away from K, too. He couldn't resist her, or the games she let him play with her. Despite her obvious enjoyment of the control he took from her and the pain he gave back, she wouldn't show him her face, or her real self. She wouldn't really let him in.

He tried to shut down those thoughts; he was at church after all. But when he finally left, locking the big doors behind him, he inevitably checked his phone. K was online, waiting for him. In spite of everything, he messaged back eagerly.

Fay's party ended. She didn't know how long it had been but it felt like days. Everyone spilled out onto the street, hugging and shouting goodbyes. Fay didn't want to go home, not yet. She wandered, the magic still high in her blood. The music from the party remained, pulsing, in her head. Except it wasn't the same music. Fay stopped. This music was faster, wilder. She turned, and saw a light shining. That was where the music was coming from. Unsteady on her feet, Fay moved towards it. It grew more distinct. Now it sounded raw, what Fay imagined the northern lights to sound like, if they could become a sound. As she got nearer the air began to shimmer, and Fay thought she could see a barrier, porous, like a veil. Shapes moved on the other side, but they were indistinct. This was it, she thought, this was where the weird music was coming from. Wobbling in her heels, she moved closer. Beyond the shimmer were figures. Fay squinted. They weren't people; one looked like a devil, with horns pushing out of his

dark hair, laughing raucously. Beside him was a great black dog, its red eyes glinting as it moved to the pulse of the music. There were two others, further back, but Fay couldn't quite make them out. She shifted, trying to understand, and they moved, becoming silhouetted under the lights. One was small, squat – a sidh, Fay realised, a faerie. The other had a mane of hair flying out behind him or her: a kelpie, in the shape of a person. It was them, playing this strange music; they were celebrating the influence they could have on the oblivious people around them. But, for a moment, Fay had been able to see beyond their guises. Now she knew: they were real. They were here.

Fay knew what happened next, in the stories. She was supposed to follow the music out of this world and into another; she could already feel its pull. And wasn't this what she'd wanted? She'd expected to be glad, to want to let the music overtake her and sink into the oblivion the stories promised. But now she didn't want to go, not now she'd seen those sinister figures. She turned unsteadily, around and around, looking for someone to anchor on. It was a surprise to find herself desperate to stay in the world. She moved away, until the shining light had dwindled. Then, she ran.

Donall heard footsteps behind him, then felt someone slam into him from behind. He turned automatically to push them away, his adrenaline rushing.

'Shit, sorry, it's fine, geez.'

That was Fay's voice. Donall made himself stop.

'Are – are you okay?'

'No, they're here, Donall, they're here!' She was staring, pupils wide. Donall breathed, trying to calm his heart.

'What are you doing here? Why were you running?'

'Staying, Donall, I'm staying!' She grinned up at him, bouncing on the balls of her feet and giggling in the semi-dark. 'I was out all night with -'

'All night? It's only midnight.'

'- with the faeries, Donall, but I don't want to go with them. They're real, did you know that, like your God, they're real!'

'What?'

Fay's eyes were wide and unfocused. Donall wondered what she could see. 'I saw the faeries, Donall, and maybe the devil – and there really *is* a kelpie! I get it now, I get it, I can believe in all those things, like God, they're there but not there, they're hidden but they're *everywhere*, Donall...'

Donall felt his anger rise, his disgust thick in his throat. She was trying to taunt him about his beliefs, trying to link the divine to – to whatever it was she'd hallucinated in her drug-fuelled haze. She looked ecstatic, but she was just seeing things that weren't there. He wanted to slap the delusions out of her. That was just because he'd been prepared to see K, he told himself. Making himself gentle, he took Fay by the elbow and steered her along the street.

'Where are we going?' Fay said. She began to struggle. 'I don't want to go, I said that, right, I said I'd stay in *this* world...' She could barely walk straight. Donall bit his tongue and clenched his free hand so he wouldn't squeeze her too hard. A few more steps and he was home, opening the door and dragging her inside. Then, he let go. As she stumbled away from him his hand brushed through her hair; he almost caught it and tugged her to him. Wasn't this what he wanted, after all? It was what he'd been doing with K, but in the flesh. The thought both thrilled him and petrified him.

'Well,' said Fay, steadying herself. 'What the fuck?'

Donall ground his teeth. He went through to the kitchen and filled a glass. He watched her drink it then gave her another, wondering how much it would really help.

'Where'd you get it?' His voice sounded like a growl.

She made a face, shrugging, and played the innocent. Donall glared at her until she relented.

'I dunno,' she said. Her voice was soft. 'I dunno, Donall, it's some guy, he doesn't even have a phone number. He's just there most nights. And it's good stuff, doesn't make me lose all the weight or that. It's fine. I'm not out of control.'

Donall held her, trying to be gentle. But she had to understand.

'It's *not* okay,' he said. His voice still sounded harsh. 'Fuck, Fay.' Her voice still sounded sweet on his tongue. 'I thought you'd stopped, I -'

She pushed at him, and he held her tighter. K had said, you like it when I squirm,

don't you? You like it when I try to fight back. Donall tried to relax his hands.

'Ow,' she said. '*God.*'

'What's his name, this guy?' said Donall. 'What's he look like? I can get him taken in, I -'

'No!' Fay's face was white and desperate. She tried to twist out of his grasp. 'You're hurting me.'

Donall stepped closer. He wanted to help. Her breath was warm on his neck, and he could smell her hair. But she flinched away from him. This wasn't right, this wasn't him. He didn't want her scared of him.

'I need to know,' he said. The growl in his voice was gone. He swallowed. 'Just tell me *something*, right – how long he's been there, what he wears, where you meet him. Anything.'

'He's usually by the music shop,' Fay said after a moment. 'He's always in, like, a dark hoodie. Trainers. I've never really seen his face. And how would I fuckin know how long he's been around! Longer than me. Not much, though, I don't think. But I don't know.'

'Right,' said Donall, reluctantly releasing her. 'And who told you that? How did you find him?'

Fay shrugged. 'You just, like, *find* these people. Go out, talk to folks, they know.' She waved a hand vaguely.

'Hey,' Donall said. 'Thank you.' He tried to sound gentle. 'You know I'm just trying to help you here, right? Like in Glasgow.'

Fay curled her arms around herself and nodded slightly. She looked hurt.

'Fuck, Fay, I'm sorry. I just -' He ran a hand across his face. 'I hate seeing you like this.'

'Can I have some more water?' Fay asked. Her voice was small, but she was looking up at him with big blue eyes, pleading. Donall touched her hand as he took the glass from her. At the sink he filled it slowly, staring out at the dark.

Fay woke in a bed firmer than her own. She rolled over; it was larger, too. She yawned.

She felt hollow, empty, like she'd been cleaned out. Then the memories returned. The shimmering light, the grotesque figures in her mind – Donall. She sat up. Was she in *Donall's* bed? She looked down at herself, still fully clothed. Thank God, she thought reflexively. Although she wasn't sure she'd mind so much, really. He wasn't like himself these days. He seemed stronger. *So much more a man.* Fay shuddered. She couldn't let herself think about *Macbeth*.

She got up, unsteadily, and tried to focus. Her bag was beside the bed. Phone, purse, keys. No pills. Had Donall taken them? She padded into the hall, suddenly realising that her mother would be wondering where she was. She hated that that was a factor, that she had to live with a parent and let her know where she was, like she was still a child.

In the living room she found Donall, curled on the sofa with a blanket. She had never seen him asleep before. As she turned to go he turned over, blinking up at her.

'Sorry to wake you,' she said.

'Hey.' Donall rubbed his face, sitting up slowly. 'It's fine.'

'I'd better get back,' Fay said, 'my mum'll -'

'I called her,' Donall said. 'Last night. I didn't tell her about the pills. Just said your phone was dead and you were staying over here with a bunch of people. I kept it vague, don't worry.' He yawned.

'Thanks,' she said. It didn't seem like enough, for all he'd done – for all he'd always done. 'And thanks for the bed, too,' was all she could say. Donall nodded. He looked so sleepy, she thought, so slight. She should go, she knew, but she didn't move.

'You were saying some odd things last night,' said Donall.

'Sorry,' she said. She remembered the light, the pounding music. 'I didn't mean it,' she said, but it sounded uncertain.

'Are you sure?' Donall watched her, wondering what she believed. 'You'd really convinced yourself, about the fairies.'

'Yeah.' Fay laughed, not meeting his eye. 'You see some outlandish stuff when you're high. Sorry,' she said again.

'Was that all it was?' Donall asked. Fay hesitated.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. For a moment, she met his gaze. ‘It was real to me. But – maybe I don’t know any more, what’s real, what isn’t.’

Donall looked thoughtful. ‘Where were you, exactly, when you saw the fairies?’

She told him, as best she could, describing street names and buildings. Donall was tapping at his phone.

‘There’s a pub there, or near enough. Maybe they had some weird lighting up, or something.’ He looked up at her, grinning. ‘The Ragweed Nags had a gig there last night. Mary’s band. You must have just heard the ceilidh tunes and been so high you saw them as creatures, fairies or whatever, instead of themselves.’ He stretched.

Fay felt cold. It was Mary – it really *was* Mary, the kelpie figure with the flying hair. And the others... But Donall had already rationalised it. She couldn’t push it, not after her vision about the boat had turned out to be nothing. ‘It’s a bit of a coincidence,’ was all she said.

‘What, Mary being one of your fairies?’ Donall was almost grinning now.

‘Kelpie,’ Fay said, then wished she hadn’t. Donall looked so dismissive. ‘Oh, I don’t know,’ she said. ‘Like I said, I was pretty gone. But I am going to stop,’ she went on. Donall raised an eyebrow. ‘I am! I will. I want to, now.’ She couldn’t say, I don’t want to be drawn in to the Otherworld. Not even Iain was worth losing who she was. But Donall looked sceptical enough already.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘That’s really good.’

‘So it’s a good thing you took the pills off me,’ she said, ‘although they cost good money.’

Donall looked at her sharply. He wasn’t sure if she was playing him, trying to get them back. ‘I’ve thrown them away,’ he said, although it wasn’t true. They were in a drawer, hidden. He couldn’t tell her he’d kept them.

Dia and Mary started searching for a flat. They lay in bed, looking online for property and mortgage brokers, stretched out with snacks or tea, imagining their life together. Dia had always pictured herself in an old place like her parents’, somewhere solid and stone, with a garden and a view. But that was ridiculous. Mary was right (as always): the

new places were cheaper to run, better altogether. Dia should have thought of that sooner, but she quickly agreed that they didn't need to look at any more old places. They had narrowed down their list, Mary's fingers moving dexterously over the keyboard. She'd learned so quickly, since that day Dia had showed her how to use a laptop in the kitchen. Dia loved to watch her concentrate, to imagine what might be going on behind those dark eyes as they focused on the screen. While Mary clicked through the new, memoryless spaces Dia would often touch her arm, or kiss her cheek, and Mary would turn to her, at first with a blank look or even a frown while her mind was still elsewhere. Dia would wait, breath held, for her to soften, to kiss her. It often took a few moments.

Soon they had a shortlist and viewings; then they narrowed it down to two, both new. One was slightly more expensive and closer to town, the other a little cheaper and further out. Mary was right: the central one was better. It was well placed for getting to Dia's work and for cycling up the hill to her parents' house. It was perfect.

Dia had carved out her day off to sign the paperwork. She didn't really need to spend her spare time painting anyway (did she?). When she woke up it was raining, silver streaks in the pigeon-wing sky. Even the grass seemed dulled by the water, although she knew tomorrow it would be bright and sweet-smelling. Spring was on its way, the crocuses opening tentatively in the cold air. She could paint them, flowers covered in snow. Not today, of course. Some other time.

As she watched, Mary appeared, shadowy and indistinct. Dia smiled at how carefully she moved. Resolute and efficient, she picked out the quickest path through the garden. Dia opened the door for her and kissed her cold, wet cheek. Mary responded by shaking herself like a wild animal, spraying water drops over Dia and her small living room. Dia laughed.

'Don't you like the rain?'

'I do not mind it. It is being damp afterwards I dislike.'

'Well, we'll take a brolly,' Dia said.

'And you must wear a coat. It is still cold.'

Dia swaddled herself in a coat she hadn't worn for years and they set out. She

found herself almost enjoying the weather. As a child she'd gone out in all weathers – with Iain. She hugged herself, remembering. They'd gone to the beach, usually, to jump in the breakers when the sky and the sea were almost indistinguishable. He had always splashed her, trying to get her wetter than she wanted, but since she was older she had had to let him, for a while.

'Are you all right?' Mary asked.

'Aye,' said Dia, letting the memories go. She kissed Mary. 'I'm excited.'

Dia signed; she paid the deposit, Mary's strong arm around her waist, keeping her steady. This was it, her freedom, like a rush of cold water. The rooms were almond-coloured, peach, cream; their home (unbelievable words) was rich and sweet. As they walked back to the B&B afterwards, Dia tried to tell Mary how odd she felt.

'It's like I'm watching myself from the outside,' she said. 'No, from inside, like -' Mary frowned, and Dia tried again. 'I don't know, it's like I'm locked safely away somewhere, and someone else has control of my body, like they're possessing me, or something. You know?'

Mary said nothing. Dia glanced at her, anxious. Possession wasn't the right word. It made it sound like there was something sinister going on, when really it was the opposite. She felt supported, like she was coping (wasn't she?), after everything.

'I'm sorry,' Dia said into the silence. 'I meant it in a good way.'

Finally, Mary smiled.

Dia's parents were happy about her finally buying a flat, but she hadn't told her friends yet. Donall had texted her; Fay had too. They were all going to go to the pub, and Dia would have to tell them. She'd promised Mary that she would, that she'd tell the two of them, be proud of herself, and be home by eleven. Dia twisted her hands. She could do it. She would get it over with.

In the pub, Donall was already in the corner doing something on his phone. She went over.

'Hey, how's it going?'

Donall started, and put his phone away.

‘What are you up to then? Secret police work?’

‘Oh, eh, nothing,’ he said. He only grinned at her joke belatedly. ‘How are you, all right?’

‘Good! I – I’m fine,’ she said. ‘How’s the actual police work?’

‘Aye, ticking along. There’s a new drug dealer going about so I’ve been mostly taking pictures of dark alleys where they think he’s been.’

Dia grinned. But Donall was looking past her, his back suddenly straightened. Dia turned. Fay was here. Dia got up and hugged her friend, laughing about her damp hair, the March rain.

‘What’re you after?’ Dia said.

Fay shyly asked for lemonade; Donall declined, pointing to his half-drunk pint. Dia went to the bar. When she came back with the drinks the others were sitting next to each other, chatting and joking together. Dia put the drinks down harder than she needed to. She couldn’t work out how close the two of them were, these days. She gave Fay her lemonade and pulled out the chair across from them, but realised that would make it seem like some kind of interview, so she put her bag and coat across it and sat at the side of the table instead. They talked about nothing for a while, mutual friends, their families, changes in the town. Then:

‘So what’s happening with this memorial service?’ asked Donall. Dia took a long drink and shrugged.

‘I guess they’ll do it,’ she said. ‘They like the idea. They thought they’d do it on the anniversary, just before the B&B opens.’

Donall nodded slowly.

‘You okay with it?’ asked Fay.

‘I guess,’ said Dia. ‘It makes sense. We can’t really wait seven years til it’s a legal thing. And it’ll be – nice.’

‘Sort of a – a celebration...’ Donall trailed off.

‘Like a celebration of him, yeah, and a way to say, we miss him, we haven’t forgotten, right?’ said Fay. Donall nodded again.

Dia watched them. It was like they were a team, speaking in tandem, helping each

other out. It was lovely, in a way, but it made Dia feel like she was intruding. She thought of Mary, waiting for her back in her room, surrounded by their plans for their new home.

‘Do you know who’ll speak at it?’ asked Fay.

Dia shrugged. ‘We haven’t got that far yet,’ she said. ‘Mum’ll probably do most of it. She might persuade Dad to read a poem or something, though.’ She didn’t want to talk about this. She had to tell them about the flat before it got too late, but she couldn’t just launch into it.

‘Am I allowed to ask about the job search?’ she asked Fay.

‘Aye, if you want. It sucks,’ she replied with a laugh. ‘I’m mostly just in the library pretending to search for stuff and reading stories instead. I mean I’ve applied for a few things. There’ll be more work over the summer, you know, so I should get *something*.’

‘Aye, you’ll manage,’ said Dia.

‘What kind of stories?’ asked Donall.

‘I’ve been getting really into folklore,’ Fay said. ‘I know it seems daft, right, but it’s actually dead creepy. People get taken away for hundreds of years by the *sidh*, or there’s the *kelpie*, you know? It ensnares people by mixing its tears with theirs, then eats them.’

Dia rolled her eyes. This was worse than her being unironically in the so-called Scottish play last year.

‘It’s actually kind of interesting, in a weird way,’ Fay went on, telling them all about the different versions of the story. Donall lapped it up. Dia couldn’t believe her friends were so fascinated by all of this romanticising stuff, especially Donall. Even if he was still hung up on Fay, he knew the reality of this place. He hadn’t been away like Fay (like Iain) and allowed its absence to make a legend of it.

Fay said. ‘But there’s another story, where the woman under its control sees it at sunset and sees the real *kelpie*, all minging and slimy with his horse’s hoof tangled in her hair. She cuts it out.’

‘Does it eat her, too?’ said Donall.

‘No, she -’

‘Wait – she cuts off a horse’s hoof?’ Dia asked.

‘Aye, with a knife she just has lying around?’ said Donall.

‘No.’ Fay held up her hands. ‘Women used to carry knives, all right, it’s a story. And this woman cuts through her hair, she leaves the kelpie sleeping and gets away.’

‘Happy ending,’ said Donall.

‘Aye, but usually there isn’t,’ said Fay. ‘Usually she dies, gets eaten or drowned.’

‘Fascinating,’ said Dia.

‘Hey, it’s not that bad,’ Donall said. Dia just shrugged.

Donall got up to get another round. He’d taken Fay’s side back there, but as he stood at the bar he worried about her. Did she really believe all this stuff? Did she believe it about Mary, like she’d implied at his the other week? It was ridiculous. He stumbled over his order, his mind more preoccupied by Mary ensnaring Dia in some way than by the drinks he was buying. But he felt just as ensnared by Fay. That was love, wasn’t it, he thought, picking up the drinks.

Dia had waited, first for Fay to be done with her daft stories, now for Donall to get back from the bar. Mary had told her they might not understand. ‘Neither of them are as lucky as we are,’ she had said. ‘They might be jealous.’ Dia had told Mary it would be fine, that her friends would get over their worries. As Donall sat back down and gave Fay a curious, appraising look, Dia hoped it was true.

They sipped their new drinks in silence. Now, thought Dia, I have to tell them now.

‘I’ve bought a flat,’ she blurted out.

‘What!’

‘Amazing,’ said Fay, clapping her hands.

‘You didn’t lead with that?’ Donall asked, incredulous.

‘Where is it?’ Fay asked.

Dia laughed. This was what she had hoped for, this enthusiasm and support. She told them all about it, not mentioning Mary, shying away from what she knew would make them draw back.

‘Is Mary going with you?’ asked Fay.

Dia nodded, staring at the table, her mind mapping the colours automatically to escape their reaction: chocolate brown with tan mixed in. But it was just a table, sticky and worn.

‘What -’ Donall stopped abruptly. Dia could see them looking at each other out of the corner of her eye. Fay’s hand was on his arm, stopping Donall saying anything more. Dia didn’t want to have to defend herself and explain. She just wanted them to be happy for her. She missed the friends who’d been there for her, who’d helped her make decision and celebrated her happiness. (Like she missed her little brother.)

‘Are you sure you know her well enough?’ asked Donall, trying to be supportive. ‘Like, is your relationship strong enough?’

‘Of course,’ said Dia.

‘But she could be anyone,’ said Fay, unable to stop herself. The faeries were close in her mind, devilish and malign, but Dia looked hurt. ‘I mean, you still don’t know anything about her past, right?’

‘Aye, but -’

‘Have you thought about getting settled in the flat yourself first, and then seeing how it is?’ Donall tried.

‘Just give it a bit more time,’ said Fay.

‘How long should I be waiting?’ Dia heard her voice rise, cracking, and begin to betray her. ‘It’s not like there’s new information about her just waiting to be discovered. It’s not like I should be doing a background check is it? And I know who she is, as a person. That’s what matters. She makes me happy, right – is that so fucking bad?’

Their shocked white faces stared at her, Donall so reproachful and Fay so concerned. As if Fay could say anything, Dia thought, living with her mum after all she’s said to me. At least I’m getting things together now. (Only because of Mary, only with her borrowed strength.)

‘It’s not like that,’ Fay said gently. ‘We just -’

‘You’ve no right to judge,’ said Dia quietly. ‘At least we’re both earning.’

Fay sat back, surprised and hurt.

‘Dia, that’s -’

‘Fuck off, Donall,’ she said, standing up to leave. ‘I’m sick of this. Just because she had some drugged up hallucination last year and you’re too into her to tell her it’s shite. You just don’t know Mary – you haven’t given her a chance. She’s good for me.’

Fay watched Dia leave, a whirl of scarves. Maybe she was right, maybe Mary was good for her. And yet – she thought again of the vision she’d had, the man falling, the woman in the red dress smiling above him. She couldn’t deny it, couldn’t pretend it didn’t exist just because there wasn’t proof. And there had been something in Dia’s voice, too, an edge to it that Fay didn’t recognise. Maybe she’d just not seen Dia enough recently. Maybe this was who she was now. Fay turned to Donall, but he was on his phone, messaging someone online.

When they moved into the new flat, Mary carried her lover laughingly across the threshold, out of the early spring rain and into the empty rooms. She looked around, knowing already how their space would look. There was a second bedroom where Mary’s private things would live: her fiddle, her laptop. She told Dianaimh where to put each box as she carried them in. Dianaimh made everything easy. Mary was grateful for that.

Dia hadn’t thought through how their flat would be organised. (Stupid.) It was good that Mary had done that work for them both.

‘Not there,’ Mary said, as Dia brought in a small box of her painting stuff. ‘There is not space. You can put it in the cupboard until you need it.’

Dia frowned. She’d thought they would each have their artistic things – Mary’s music, Dia’s painting – in the spare room, that it would be a kind of joint studio. But that wasn’t practical. Mary actually made money out of her art; Dia’s was just a hobby, really (wasn’t it?). Mary knew what she was doing. Dia just needed to trust her.

It took a long time, bringing up all those boxes. Dia was exhausted when she’d finished. (Weak.) She made a nest of blankets and pillows for them to sleep on before their bed was delivered, and flopped down on it, grinning up at Mary, hoping she’d come down and join her, kiss her... But Mary was frowning.

‘Was there not wine?’ she said.

‘Oh, sorry,’ Dia said, remembering. She dragged herself up and opened the wine they’d bought to celebrate, returning with two full glasses. Mary smiled, and Dia basked in it, resolving to be less lazy in future. She had to make more of an effort for her partner. She held Mary close as they drank to their future together.

11: forward motion

Tourists had started to ask for Dia's paintings already, although the season was barely starting. It was alarming. When she could she went back to the Creagmuir, where they'd decided she would keep her studio, but her paintings became darker and more fanciful than she intended. It was like painting from memory, or from a distance. She tried to tell Mary this, but she couldn't find the words.

'You could take a break from your art,' Mary said. 'You do not need to paint all the time, do you?'

Dia hadn't thought of that. Painting was what she did, what she had always done. But now she imagined the tourists taking the pictures home, putting them on the wall somewhere or in a pile of holiday things, bringing them out sometimes as a prop to illustrate what they knew about Scotland. That hadn't been what she'd wanted from her painting when she'd started. She'd never set out to be part of the tourist industry. It seemed to have snuck up on her and sunk its teeth in while she wasn't looking. Her

watercolours were only all right, they weren't good, and that oil painting, the one with the sunlight in long, broad lines, had become crystalline and brittle. None of it was working as it should. Perhaps if Dia stopped for a while she would come back to it with fresh eyes, able to paint something different – something real. 'I guess I could take a break,' she said.

Mary's eyes were on her, those dark eyes full of love. Mary knew what was best. 'I know that you like it,' she said. 'But we can find things to do together, can we not?'

'Of course.' Dia returned Mary's smile. Mary was right – of course she was. There had been so much to do, putting furniture together and organising objects and paperwork, that they'd hardly been able to go outside. Dia had noticed Mary staring out of their windows, longing for more fresh air than the windows could let in. She'd tried to sort everything out while Mary was playing music, so they could spend more time together: she'd turned down invitations from Fay and Donall, and used her work breaks to phone insurance companies and the like. Work didn't care, and Fay and Donall still didn't entirely approve, so she didn't mind giving them a little space. If Dia stopped spending time painting, she and Mary would be able to go out together more. They could spend more time outside as the weather grew milder, walking the cliff paths, skirting the beach. Mary was happier outside, and Dia loved to see her smile. When she was happy (and not irritable, not angry like on the beach) Mary soothed her, like her painting had done.

And Dia had the memorial service for Iain to think about, too. Her parents had agreed that it would be right, one year on (a whole year, and nothing), to have something to celebrate him. It would be a way to finally lay him to rest. Dia imagined another party, loud and raucous, with everyone being, for the night, like Iain: gregarious, boisterous, fun. She could understand that, the catharsis of it. It would let the curtain drop but still leave a gap for remembrance (for hope). She would suggest another party, she thought. Maybe Mary's band could play.

At the door of the Creagmuir she said goodbye to Mary. She knew it was hard for Mary to leave her alone, even for a while, but she had a rehearsal in town.

‘I will come for you soon,’ Mary said, and Dianaimh kissed her. As she walked away, into town – in the sunlight, in the spring – Mary realised she was happy. The wind blew music through the water and the trees, and the air smelled fresh, green. Mary had dreaded this: the loss of her darkness, the return of the light and the warmth. Last summer, the light had meant eyes, staring at her everywhere, but now she was watched much less. The town had become used to her. Jamie had been right about that, at least. And her band were being booked for more and more gigs, like the wedding they were practising for today. As they played, Mary flexed her hands, knowing she could control the music as well as the people who let themselves feel it. With Campbell and the others she could push the dancers on, eyes flashing, hands and fingers pressing into their instruments, until they collapsed with tights ripped at the heel and shoes spotted with blood. It was no longer a surprise to Mary that they did not stop or pull themselves away – they enjoyed the recklessness. She saw the joyful exhilaration on their sweat-soaked faces as they left each time. And then Campbell would suggest a stroll, in his detached, light way, ‘or perhaps a bite to eat?’ Ben would shrug, and Siobhan would smile, and while Dianaimh waited for her at home Mary would roam the streets in the dead small hours, singing, laughing, eating with the others where and what they wanted. Mary was safe with these people. She was free. The town was hers, finally, and so she did not fear the approaching summer and its light.

Only Dia’s mum was at the Creagmuir, sitting at the kitchen table in front of a pile of lists. Dia remembered her own frantic list-making just after the party on the boat. She wished Mary was beside her (always, always there to hold her up). It was true, what Mary said: she shouldn’t go out on her own.

‘I’ll go grab your dad,’ Karen said. ‘He’s just clearing up after the bonfire.’

Dia nodded. She had missed the annual bonfire this year; she had been watching Mary play. Usually she loved it. Her father would clear out all the junk that had accumulated over the winter as they got ready for the summer season. The neighbours would bring their junk round too, old bits of furniture and fallen branches, dry sticks for kindling from the woods. It had become a sort of tradition.

When her parents came in she said, 'I thought we should have a party.'

'Aye, that would be lovely, for afterwards.' Karen beamed.

'Afterwards?'

'We've already managed to talk to John about the main part,' Craig said. 'He's happy to lead the service.'

Dia's stomach dropped. Her parents were planning a funeral. They had done it without her, they'd started planning it before she'd arrived. Dia remembered her brother's laughing dismissal of church and religion. How awful, to confine him there now.

'John was very understanding when we said we didn't want it *too* religious,' Karen said.

'And it's a good space for it,' Craig said. 'We've booked the hall for after.'

Dia nodded, blinking to keep tears at bay. She knew they wouldn't notice. Where was Mary's hand on her thigh, squeezing, reassuring her, keeping her safe?

'And we've asked Tom, from the university, if he'll speak a wee bit,' Karen said. 'And your dad'll say something too, about how he was as a kid, maybe, and – and about the past year.'

'What about –' Dia hesitated, trying to find the words. 'What about in between, what he was like here, you know? And his plans for being back, how he was coming home?'

'Well,' said Craig, 'would you like to do that?'

Dia shook her head. She couldn't; she didn't know. She only remembered his scorn of the place. His decision to move back change had never quite made sense. It had seemed so sudden.

'I don't know why he was coming back,' she said. 'He always hated it here.'

Her parents exchanged a glance.

'It was the job he was offered, at your dad's friend's company,' Karen said gently. 'He didn't get any others.'

So it was failure, Dia thought, that brought him home. He hadn't had the change of heart she'd assumed. How like him not to say. How like him to throw a party instead

of complaining, to come home arrogant and full of himself when really he was so reduced.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ she asked, but her voice was drowned out by her father’s.

‘Would Donall like to speak?’ asked Craig.

‘I’ll ask him,’ Dia replied, trying to meet her parents’ eyes. Craig’s cheerful look was uncertain, but Karen was contentedly adding to her list.

Finally, Mary arrived to take her away, and Dia sank into her familiar warmth with relief. As they left, she told Mary about it all: the funeral, the church; Iain’s failure. All his exuberance had been a lie. Dia was buoyed up by Mary’s disgust, her sympathy, and at home, she thought, this is why I love her, this is why I have to treat her well. She kissed Mary, wanting to make love, to please her, and Mary responded. As the kissing inevitably turned to fucking, Dia tried to do whatever Mary wanted.

Afterwards Dia stroked Mary’s stomach, the curve of her breasts and shoulders. She knew Mary preferred to lie flat, half-sleeping, her eyes focused far away as the rush wore off, but Dia couldn’t help herself wanting to cuddle. Running a loving hand along her cheek, her fingers brushed against the silver pendant Mary never took off. Dia had seen her shower with it on, cleaning her neck underneath the leather straps, around the silver that lay like a harness between them. It was part of her.

Mary took her hand away. ‘Hey,’ she said.

‘Mm?’

‘Get me some water.’

‘Sure.’

Dia got up and found she was a little cold. Mary stretched on the bed like a wildcat. Dia checked her phone as she padded to the kitchen and filled a glass. There was a text from Fay: ‘are you guys having a housewarming?’

Dia tugged at her hair. She didn’t want the others coming over, not yet, although it had been a month already. And Fay kept going on about the folklore she was reading. Dia didn’t like it (it was full of waves, whirling down). But, she thought, maybe Mary

would. Then they wouldn't have to talk about Iain. As Dia handed Mary her water and lay back down, she told her about the silly tales, exaggerating Fay's interest in them for the smile she knew it would elicit.

'So she's interested in the *each-uisge*,' Mary said. Dia leant up on her elbow.

'You know what it's called?' she asked.

'Yes. They are different, actually. The kelpie lives in rivers, the *each-uisge* in lochs.'

'None in the sea?'

'No.' Mary's face took on a sly expression. 'I suppose one could have swum down a river or out of a sea-loch,' Mary said. 'That way it might have ended up in the sea. There could have been too many of them, and too few humans to eat. I believe it is the same with bears -'

'They move to the sea when it's crowded?' Dia started, as she heard her own words: so sardonic and cutting. She searched Mary's face for annoyance, but, luckily, Mary's brow was smooth.

'No,' Mary said. 'They spread out for better hunting. Wolves also.' Her face was serious. Dia swallowed her smile. 'So a kelpie or an *each-uisge* found a bay somewhere, a shallow part of the sea, and made its home there. It became a sea-kelpie.'

'I guess,' Dia said. 'But wouldn't there be, like, other magical sea creatures that would eat it?'

'Not this one,' Mary said. She rolled over to face Dia. Her smile gleamed, toothy and bright. 'This one survived.'

'You make it sound real,' Dia said. She tried to be cheerful, to care about the stories, but she just wanted to feel her lover hold her. Still, Mary was interested, animated. Dia made an effort. 'You're good with stories,' she said.

'People believed in these stories, once.'

'Not any more, though,' Dia said. 'I mean, apart from the damn tourists, but they're just romanticising the whole count-'

Mary turned away from her. Dia felt her heart contract, as, for a moment, she thought Mary might really be angry. But she simply took a drink of water and carefully set the glass back down. She was frowning. Dia knew she'd gone too far. She'd upset

Mary, after everything she'd done. (Thoughtless.)

'Why do you dislike the tourists so much?' Mary asked. Her voice was calm, like a balm on a harsh burn. Dia wondered if this was a test, if she should answer honestly. Mary turned to her and stroked her hair. She decided yes, she should. She owed her that much. (Everything – she owed her everything.)

'It's just, they come up here and seem to think the whole country's just some magical fairytale land for them to play in, just because the landscape's pretty. They don't *think*. They don't see the people who work here, who live here – that there's shite going on as well as the pretty stuff.' Mary was still frowning, and Dia tried to mitigate what she'd said. She couldn't allow herself to make Mary angry. 'I don't mind the pagan stuff, the history, you know, because it's properly over. No kelpie's going to come and get me, not really, and Halloween's just a holiday, not the devil's night or whatever. And now, what is it, spring. What crazy stuff is supposed to happen in spring?'

'Bealtuinn,' Mary murmured. 'Beltane is next. Soon.' She wasn't angry. Dia breathed out, and snuggled closer to her. Mary always seemed so serious about this stuff, like Donall was about church. Dia knew she should be nicer about it. She had to do better. She always had to do better.

'What happens then?' she asked, trying to be interested.

'The start of summer,' Mary said. She stretched in the bedclothes. 'It is a night of brilliant fire, of pleasure and feasting.' A time for travelling between worlds, she did not say; a night of trials. Dianaimh frowned, trying, Mary thought, to find another way to dismiss it all. She was glad of Dianaimh's distrust of tourists, of the history and folklore that drew them here. Of course, they were the same thing, history and folklore, although Dianaimh would not understand that. Mary smiled.

Dia had managed to avoid having guests so far. The flat was their space, hers and Mary's, and they didn't want anyone else around. But late in April the doorbell rang.

'Answer it,' said Mary.

Dia obeyed, opening the door in her bare feet. It was her parents. She hadn't expected them. What would Mary think?

‘We just thought we’d drop by,’ Karen said. ‘We’d like to go over the plan for the memorial service again, if that’s all right.’

‘Sure,’ Dia said, trying to look pleased to see them. Her stomach twisted. ‘Come on in.’ The service wasn’t the only reason they were here, she knew. They wanted to see the flat, to watch her and Mary move around each other in their new space.

‘Mary,’ she called. ‘Mary, it’s Mum and Dad.’

Mary came to the door of the spare – no – Mary’s room, where she had been practising. Dia held her breath.

‘Hello,’ she said, with a broad smile. ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’

‘Yes, please. Oh, and we brought these,’ Karen said, holding out a box of biscuits. Mary gave them to Dia with a steely look. Was she angry because of her parents, or had Dia forgotten something else? She hurried off to the kitchen, unsure.

When she came back with a tray of mugs and plates, Mary was chatting happily with her parents. Dia relaxed. Of course Mary could handle this. She was telling Karen and Craig about how they’d chosen the sofa, where they’d found the coffee table. Dia sat down, and her parents started running through the plans for the service: they’d chosen music and readings already.

‘Have you any idea what Donall might say?’ Karen asked.

‘No,’ said Dia. ‘I doubt he’s got it worked out yet.’ She saw her parents glancing around the room, trying to recognise their daughter in the decorations she and Mary had chosen. They were judging her instead of focusing on Iain. They weren’t paying attention to what mattered.

‘And what about your painting of him?’ Karen asked.

Dia looked up, shocked. They must have looked at the square painting, the few crappy lines she’d drawn. It was a betrayal – they’d gone into her studio and rummaged. Dia felt cold, empty. (Not angry; why wasn’t she angry?) Mary was right; it was a good thing they’d moved out. Now she just needed to find a little corner in their flat for her painting things. She probably didn’t need all of it. The important things would only take up a few square feet.

‘Oh,’ she said out loud. ‘No. Sorry.’ It was ridiculous. Of course she couldn’t

finish the painting; it wasn't for show. It was supposed to be only for her. 'I've barely started it,' she said. She could see her father's indifference, Karen's patience. Her mother was *being understanding*. The phrase sounded sarcastic as she thought it. Dia realised it was Mary's voice she was hearing in her head, a memory or imagining. She leaned closer to her, as if for protection, and Mary stroked her back.

Finally, her parents left, and Dia relaxed.

'How did that happen?' Mary asked.

'What, the service?'

'Your parents,' she said. 'You must have invited them. Why did you not tell me?'

'But I didn't,' said Dia. 'I didn't know.' Mary was angry, seething; she should have noticed. (Ungrateful). 'I'm sorry, I wish they hadn't come too, they should have texted me first.' Mary slammed a hand into the table. Dia started. Her arm was tensed, strong and capable. Dia felt fear rise in her throat. 'Mary,' she said, tears forming, 'I'm sorry. I really didn't know.'

'All right,' Mary said. 'I just do not like to be surprised.'

'I know,' Dia said, stroking Mary's hair. 'I'm sorry.' She hoped Mary would forgive her, come to her warmly and lovingly again. But Mary got up and turned away.

'I must practice,' she said, leaving Dia on the sofa.

Dia tried to relax as she heard Mary's door close. The fear was so unjustified; she shouldn't have felt it. Mary had every right to be angry with her family's intrusion. Dia was angry too. As Mary played, Dia looked at the schedule they'd drafted for the service. Iain Machlin, they'd written at the top, as if this event could encapsulate him, represent him. They were failing him, they weren't giving him the right sort of attention (again, like the year before, when no one noticed, no one saw). He would have hated all of this, the flowers and organ music. But then, maybe he wouldn't have minded. He had been enamoured with the mythologising of their home; perhaps he would have enjoyed the Beltane thing, the service held a year and a day after his death. (Death: the word hardly shocked her, now, hardly made a mark.) But Dia wasn't sure she knew, any more, what her brother would have wanted.

12: memorial

The night before the service Dia couldn't sleep. Mary tried to distract her with sex, but she didn't want that, only warm, gentle caresses. Of course, she submitted, letting Mary fuck her until Dia gave her the responses she was looking for. The sex didn't please Dia, but Mary was so content, so relaxed, that Dia didn't feel she could ask for anything she liked, not now. Instead she tried, miserably, to sleep. It was just the service (wasn't it?). It brought back everything: the loss she thought she'd subdued, the pain she'd covered over. But it would pass. Still, she wished the arm Mary had flung across her would hold her more carefully. She was unable (stupid) to ask for such tenderness.

In her sleep she rolled, over and over, tangled in something. It was slippery but it held her like a net; she couldn't get free. She twisted against it but it hurt her – something was pressing into her head. She turned to look, and saw a long, knobbled hoof tangled in her hair. It was covered in something slimy and greenish. Dia wanted to scream, but she knew she had to get free, she had learned this somewhere. What was she

supposed to do?

Dia woke in her bed, sweating and tangled up in the sheets, gripping Mary's wrist. The world returned, and the fear began to fade. What a daft dream. But Mary was awake, now, and frowning at her. 'Sorry,' Dia murmured, releasing Mary quickly. Mary rolled over, and Dia felt herself exhale. Now that her unease had ebbed, Dia felt different – raw. The dream had left a residue on her consciousness. Dia closed her eyes against it.

Mary wondered what her lover had dreamed, and what truth that imagining had held. It was Bealtuinn, after all. When Dia fell back to sleep Mary slipped out of bed, restless.

Donall stumbled down the street. He was wasted. Must've had too many with Chris and Robbie and some others from work. It was the service, the public sharing of grief he had to be part of. He was going to have to speak at it in front of all those people, and he knew he would just babble and stutter and make a fool of himself, like he was still in school. But he was a policeman now.

That was it. That was why he was still out. He'd wanted to find that drug dealer, the one who'd been supplying Fay – wanted rid of him. But he was going uphill. It wasn't just the booze making it hard to walk; his feet were taking him upwards. He raised his head from the pavement, with effort, and saw the church. Yes, he thought. That would do.

When he reached the churchyard the graves seemed empty and cold. It was his fault, he realised, his own darkness that he was bringing to this place. He needed God now, to help bring back the light. But he wasn't worthy of God's love. Not after the booze, or the things he'd done with K.

He wandered into the grassy space beyond the churchyard, overlooking the bay. This wasn't consecrated. He could sit here. He felt the pills in his pocket as he sat heavily on the ground. He couldn't remember why he'd brought them out. Didn't need drugs if you were looking for a drug dealer. But he'd taken them off Fay, months ago, after they'd ruined her life. He took them out and looked at them. So small, he thought,

to be so catastrophic. Just a tiny circle in the palm of his hand. What did she see in them?

He would take one, he thought, just to find out. Just so he knew what he was dealing with. That made sense, didn't it? It was hard to swallow without water; his throat was dry. But he managed. He sat there, wondering what it would feel like. He'd never been high, not really. In the dark, he looked out towards the horizon.

Fay walked down the midnight street, every step an effort. She had tried not to come out. She'd really tried. But she couldn't handle it, the shaking, the vomiting, the coldness of the world. She'd taken some pills, some extras she'd found. They weren't enough. The memories of the year before wouldn't leave her. She needed something more, just tonight, just to block them out. She would only have one or two more, not too much to be drawn away to the other place, just enough to forget this one, for a while. She measured her steps, one, heartbeat, two. Almost there. The shadow appeared in front of her, and she grabbed the bag eagerly, giving him the money.

'That is not enough.' The man's voice was icy.

'Sorry, I -' He snatched the bag back, and turned away, counting. His hoodie was green, Fay noticed, a deep green that reminded her of the deep ocean, just before the light died.

'This is all you will get.'

It wasn't enough, but Fay snatched the bag anyway, and left. She wanted, suddenly, to watch the sea. She could climb up the hill and just sit there in the empty grass below the church while she came up. If she was by the church, the faeries wouldn't claim her. She could be home before sunrise, and sober before the service. But someone was already there, someone bigger than her, turning to her. 'Who's that?' she said, immediately regretting it.

'Fay,' said Donall, spreading his arms and looking at her in disbelief. 'Fay!'

'Donall,' she said. 'What are you doing here?'

'The darkness is bright,' Donall said, and Fay laughed. She was coming up now; her laugh was too long, too strong. She revelled in it. But Donall seemed high as well.

‘Are you drunk?’ she asked him. Donall was never drunk, never out of control.

‘Shh.’ He put his hand on her lips, and she slapped it away, harder than she needed to. He pushed her, hard, and she let herself fall back in the grass, giggling.

‘Sorry,’ said Donall. ‘Sorry, sorry Fay.’

‘Why are you sorry?’ she said, staring up at the stars.

‘Shouldn’t hurt you,’ Donall mumbled. ‘S bad to hurt you, hurt anyone.’ Fay lifted her head and watching him sitting there, mournful, for a moment, then she grabbed him and kissed him.

Donall wasn’t sure it was real. Fay was pulling him to her, undoing his belt; Donall had to please her, to make it right. He slid his hands over her body, taking it, taking it all in, her neck, the long lines of her veins, her breasts, the hard nubs of nipples he could crush between his fingers, her taut stomach, the edges of her ribs. He could hear her saying something, but the world was tilting. What was she saying?

‘Hold me,’ Fay muttered, ‘hold me down.’ Donall wasn’t sure he’d heard her right but her hands were lying in the grass by her head so he grabbed them, held them, and when she struggled he squeezed them, just a little – and she gasped in pleasure. This was really what she wanted, Donall thought. It must be a dream, it must be the drugs. If he was dreaming, he realised, he could do what he wanted, so he pulled her legs open, rough and excited, and finally, he entered her, he was getting to fuck her after all these years of watching, waiting, miserably masturbating, now he had her, and God she felt good, squirming – *you love it when I squirm* – and bucking – *you like it when I try to fight back*. He held her wrists in one hand and kept thrusting into her, saying her name again and again, Fay, Fay, Kay, Fay, Fay...

Fay cried out in pleasure as he made her surrender. They didn’t usually do this, the men she fucked for relaxation; this one was the real thing. She almost wanted to be sober for him. But he was done too soon, and started stroking her hair. Being *nice*. When his hand snagged in her tangles she enjoyed the pain, but he apologised, pulling his hand away and shaking off stray hairs and green strands of grass. Fay shifted in the grass, moving her hips, hoping for satisfaction.

‘Hey,’ she said, leaning up on her elbows as he buttoned himself up. ‘What about

me?’

‘Is that what you...want?’ Donall was hesitant. His orgasm had been sobering, and he was ashamed, now, of the way he’d treated her. He should never have touched her: her eyes were unfocused, her face pale.

‘Why else...?’ she said.

Donall got back on the ground beside her, and stroked her thigh. She smiled contentedly up at him, giving him her wrists to hold. Donall squeezed his own eyes shut to kiss her, hold her, pleasure her. She ground against his fingers, twisted in his grasp. He only felt a corresponding stirring in himself when her back tensed into a high orgasmic arch and he heard her cry out. He kept kissing her neck, biting down on her breasts, until she pushed him away. Her face was luminous; she looked exhausted. She rolled away from him, and Donall stood up, ready to leave.

Dia woke early and automatically turned over, reaching for Mary. Mary wasn’t there. She must be in the bathroom, Dia thought. She lay on her back, thinking of colours and light, and felt herself drifting back to sleep. Mary would slip in beside her in a moment, quiet and warm, and they would sleep for another few hours. But the next time she woke – hours or minutes later – Mary was still gone. This time Dia sat up, patting groggily at the sheet, as if Mary might suddenly have shrunk and got lost in the bedclothes, like some tiny creature hidden among the reeds. Dia tried to clear her head. She knew she shouldn’t worry; Mary had probably gone for a run. It was only seven. They had hours to themselves, before that awful service. When Mary got back it would be all right. Dia stretched. She could even get up and paint.

The thought was tempting. The colours had been there in her mind, as if behind a curtain. She could reach out and pull it away. But of course (idiot), her paints were at her parents’ house. It was a shame they didn’t have space for her big easel here. It wouldn’t fit in Mary’s room, and it wasn’t really appropriate to have it in the living room, especially when she didn’t use it much now. Dia got up, annoyed about her empty morning (and the waves that would come into her mind if she left it empty). Running a hand through her hair, she realised she would have to wash and dry it. She

could stretch her shower out to take a long time. And by then, Dia figured, Mary would be back.

After her shower, Mary still wasn't there. Dia eyed the door to her room, wondering if there *was* space for her easel, after all. Couldn't she just go check? She turned the handle gently, but the door didn't move. Frowning, she tried again, harder. Nothing. She pushed against the door. Was it stuck? Broken? Was there something else wrong with this damn flat? Dia stopped, shocked at the thought. She had chosen this flat; she *loved* it. It was her escape, her freedom, her peace. And it was modern, and bright, and had a view of just a sliver of sea between the buildings. It was even in a wonderful central location, making it easy for her to get to work: it took her half the time it used to. But where were the trees, the birdsong she was used to at the Creagmuir?

The door was just locked. Mary must have locked it. Dia tugged on the door handle again, wondering if -

'Dianaimh.'

There she was, Mary. She was by the door, panting in her running shoes, taking off her dark green hoodie. They stared at each other for a moment. Then, without thinking (a relief, not to think, wasn't it?) Dia relaxed and moved towards her, holding out her arms.

Mary embraced her without moving forward. What was Dianaimh doing?

'I wasn't trying to pry,' Dianaimh said. She looked anxious, apologetic. 'I just -' She said something about her painting, but Mary did not listen. She was tired. Her nighttime run had not been as relaxing as usual. It was almost summer, and her darkness was waning. Usually Dianaimh did not notice she was gone. 'I will open the door for you when I have had my tea,' she said.

Dianaimh hurried off to the kitchen, and Mary unlocked the door and looked around. She could not allow Dianaimh to come poking around in here, or even to consider doing so. Her laptop was there, in the black sports bag on the floor, and her money, in a wooden box, locked and protected. She added some notes to the pile already there, then clicked the combination lock shut.

'There is no space.' Dia heard Mary's voice through the walls. Dia felt herself

nodding. Of course. She knew that already. Still, she would have liked to check herself, to measure, perhaps. She picked up Mary's tea and noticed that her hand was shaking. As Mary appeared in the doorway she tried to look cheerful, handing her the tea carefully.

'May I look?' she asked.

'Milk,' said Mary gently.

'Oh! Shit, sorry,' said Dia. She took the hot tea back over to the fridge. She felt close to tears. It was the service, she thought. It was getting to her. She handed over the tea once again. 'Sorry.'

'That is better,' said Mary, taking a sip. Dia turned away from the dark glint in her eyes.

Fay woke up and rolled over, and the ground seemed to fall away. No, she thought, don't let me fall. The panic gave her strength, and she got up, away from the drop, away from whoever was grasping her, pulling her down. Her fingers fumbled over grass and earth, but she stayed – she stayed. Her heart beat so fast she wondered if she was still high, if this weird cliff-face was simply the edge of her bed rather than the entrance to another world. But the wind was sharp, and there was dirt on her clothes. She looked around. The cliff was just a rise in the grass. She was safe, and she was alone. As she stood up, though, something slid out from between her legs. Was that semen? Her heartbeat didn't slow down as she remembered the sex, the release of orgasm. She couldn't remember who the man had been. She thought, oddly, of Iain, and wondered what it would have been like with him. What kinds of things would he have wanted to do with her?

She took off her dirty jacket and shook it out before setting off, stiffly, towards home. Her head ached; her jaw ached. She had felt this way so many times before: flat, empty, regretful, like she had been turned inside out. But today...she thought of that cliff edge, and felt a real, living fear. She almost laughed. It was over, she thought, it was really over this time. She would get some proper help.

Partway down the hill, she remembered. Donall. The way he'd restrained her, out

here in the open. She felt her breath catch, and a sudden stab of desire. For *Donall*

As she turned a corner she felt the sunlight warm her back.

Donall stayed in the shower until the water went cold. He stayed, even then, shivering. He wondered if Fay was okay. No: he knew she was okay. She'd enjoyed herself, she'd got what she wanted, she hadn't cared who it was with. He wished she'd cared. He wished it had mattered to her that it was him, not just the nearest man.

He turned the shower off and, like a rat, shook the water from his body. He would have to iron his shirt, polish his shoes, all the superficial things which were so important on days like this. But the clock said ten-thirty. He had time. Wiping his face with his towel, he sat down on his bed instead, cold and naked, and did nothing.

His phone trilled. Donall jumped. He picked it up: a message from K. He clicked on her icon and saw her costume, the latex, the lips. Donall thought of Fay, of her real, cold flesh in the grass, and deleted K's message. She wasn't enough, he thought. She wasn't real.

Another message appeared immediately, and Donall threw his phone across the room. It bounced against the wall. Nothing broke.

Dianaimh was standing in the flat in her underwear. Mary enjoyed the sight, although above her delectable body her face was miserable.

'But – but, I wear them to work,' she was saying, holding up the trousers she wanted to wear to the service. 'They're formal enough, and they're dark, and -'

'No,' said Mary. 'They are just not right. You know that black is more appropriate for funerals.'

Tears sprang to Dia's eyes. She didn't know how to explain to Mary why wearing not-quite-black was so important to her. And it was a memorial service, not a funeral. But maybe she was just being ridiculous, trying to make spurious distinctions. She sniffed, and tried not to let the tears fall. She should have been ready by now. (Lazy, as always). Mary was; she looked sleek and wonderful in a long black dress. She held her for a moment.

‘You should let me worry about the small things, like clothes,’ Mary said. ‘You are not so good at those. And today you need to be thinking about your brother.’

Dia nodded. Mary was right; of course she was. She was just trying to make the day easier for her. She pulled on the dress Mary had chosen. It was a little shorter than she usually liked, but Mary had found thick black tights to go with it. She really knew about these things; Dia was just being silly.

Mary eyed the church warily as they arrived. It seemed so sure of itself, sitting heavy and squat on the hill. She did not like it. She understood worship in forests, in fields, movable places where the wind and the sun acted the part of gods. But this stone left her cold. Dianaimh was shivering too, but out of grief and anxiety. Mary put a perfunctory arm around her shoulders, to warm her.

The minister, John, the one who would be in control, was standing on the steps. He shook hands with everybody and ushered them inside. Mary composed her face. As they approached she slowed her steps slightly, so that instead of leading Dianaimh she now stood behind her. She smiled silently as John embraced her lover, and allowed herself to be greeted. She found it difficult to enter, even after Dianaimh’s skirt and heels had disappeared inside. She knew John would be watching, so she bowed her head and closed her eyes. That was what they did, she thought, but she was not, she realised, entirely sure. She wished she did not have to be here.

Inside, glass saints and saviours lined the walls, each with the same face, the same outstretched hands. Mary followed Dianaimh to the front with the rest of the family. Near the altar were flowers, cut and dying, and a large photograph of Iain. Other people were starting to arrive. Fay was sitting a few rows behind her with a bewildered expression. Mary repressed a smile. Donall appeared, looking pale and uncomfortable in his black suit. He hugged Dianaimh, only nodding briefly to Mary. She gave him her warmest smile, and enjoyed watching him turn away. Everyone was on edge today. Dianaimh twisted her hands together, her bracelet about to break between them.

The organ began, a deep cacophony which echoed through Mary’s ribcage. She stood up with the others and tried to compose her face. As John signalled them all to sit

again, Mary studied the photograph. Iain seemed cheerful, well-fed, like he had always found life easy. Mary felt her expression sour, and struggled to right it. Dianaimh was crying silently beside her, big ugly red blotches appearing around her eyes. Mary put an arm around her and waited for the whole thing to be over.

John spoke. He talked of regret, the weight and heaviness which lay upon everyone, how to try to let it go. Mary stifled a yawn, and glanced around. All this rubbish was actually working on these people, she realised. Fay's face was taut and full of wonder; Donall looked like he might cry. They had vices, Mary knew, secret pleasures that they would act on then regret. And this man, John, he wanted them to give them up – not just the regret which weighed them down as he claimed, but the pleasures themselves. He wanted them to live boring, sunless lives in a cage of stone like this one. Mary fingered her necklace, thankful she had no such inhibitions.

As the congregation bowed their heads in prayer, Mary tilted hers downwards too. This was another thing about their religion: all the obsequiousness. Why have a god who made you bow down, she thought, when worship could raise you up and give you strength and courage? When the prayer came to an end, she moved her lips with everybody else. Then she raised her eyes upwards to make her own prayer. She wanted to see the sky.

Fay felt light, in church. She'd never believed, never attended except from school, but today the place seemed full of compassion. It made her feel like she would be all right in the end; that she would be forgiven. She stared into Iain's glossy, photographed eyes and said goodbye. It was time to let him go – to let a lot of things go. She thought of all the people she'd pushed away: the colleagues in Glasgow, her old housemates, the friends from drama school she'd avoided for months. Maybe it was too late for many of them, but she had to get back to Dia. Fay watched her sobbing into Mary's shoulder, and resolved to make more of an effort to get to know Dia's girlfriend. Maybe she'd been wrong about Mary.

Then Donall got up, striding confidently towards the front. Fay listened to what he said about Iain, his larger-than-life best friend. She held her breath for him as he choked on his words, blushing red, and relaxed when she saw that he was coping. He

even managed to make everyone laugh, in joyful remembrance at some high school shenanigans. Dia got up to hug him as he stepped down, and Fay was amazed to realise she was proud of him.

Donall sat down, shaking. He had done well, although, somehow, it didn't matter. He just wanted Iain back. To him he could have told the whole story of the night before, everything that had happened with Fay. Iain would have been shocked, then laughed, and, ultimately, understood. Making it into a story for him, sharing the awfulness and the awkwardness of it all, would have helped Donall let go. As the minister said a few more words, Donall let his tears fall. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe.

Finally, it was over. Dia struggled to her feet and moved off with her family, trying not to lean too heavily on Mary. As they reached the end of the aisle Dia felt, again, that she wanted to turn, to smile at Iain and say, 'God, wasn't that awful,' or make some stupid joke. She turned, and there he was, smiling straight at her from his photograph. Iain seemed to raise his glass to his sister, and she felt his presence, like he was with her, like this squeezing in her chest was his honest, laughing embrace. She felt it all the more strongly for knowing it was an illusion. He was with her as they were offered drinks in the church hall, and he was with her, too, in the receiving line where she stood pressing hands, giving out sad smiles like favours and listening to other people's memories. He laughed at their anecdotes and warned her about old Uncle Ross who would go on forever. He held her heart steady when friends and old girlfriends stammered and cried. He was gone, Dia knew that now – but he was there.

13: brightening

As the days lengthened, Donall felt something release inside him, like a catch had been broken. He went to church in the evenings, but as he sat in his pew, he summoned no ghosts. When he thought of Iain now, it was as a memory, as the past. His friend no longer spoke to him. Instead Donall simply sat, thinking about the windows and letting his mind wander. Sometimes it strayed to thoughts of his desires, the control he craved, the pain he loved inflicting. But it came back, too, to the dark and the quiet, and Donall knew his desires could wait. He even hoped they might dissipate.

Occasionally he thought of Fay. He knew she wouldn't get in touch with him, and he couldn't bring himself to be the one to bridge the gap. He didn't want to play the underdog with her any longer. He kept remembering her eyes, wide and unfocused, staring past him, just like all the druggies who passed through the police station. He didn't want to be close to those eyes again. He almost felt free. Had he been cleansed of his obsession, his adoration, by their sordid, cold sex in the grass? Could it be, finally,

over?

Leaving her first shift working at the library, Fay felt hopeful. Her shift had gone well, and her head was clear. She really had stopped intoxicating herself. As she walked through town, she let herself dawdle, revelling in the new strength her body was developing as she followed the doctors' regimen of exercise and therapy. The sun was shining, too, and town was full of people making the most of what they knew would be a brief brightness before the clouds closed in again. Fay felt light; she almost felt like herself. All her hope made her nervous: she expected some new disaster to be preparing for her, hidden like the faeries but waiting. Fay knew it would seem ridiculous to other people, but her happiness didn't feel safe. Her work was only voluntary, after all; she couldn't come off the dole. It wasn't a lifeline, just a small glimmer of light in the darkness.

Then she saw Donall. It was amazing that she hadn't run into him before, she thought, in their small town. He hadn't seen her yet. Would he stop, she wondered, would they speak? She hadn't called him. She never did when she slept with someone; she never followed up. But now she found herself slowing, and when he lifted his head and noticed her she felt her face brightening into a greeting. He stopped to say hello, and Fay found she didn't know what to say.

'How're you doing?' Donall asked. She saw him eyeing her, clearly checking her face and body for signs of drug use.

'I'm better,' she said, glancing around. 'I'm – I'm getting help, uh, therapy and stuff...and I'm volunteering at the library.' She wanted him to be pleased with her. It was ridiculous, but she was gratified when he gave her an approving grin. I should have called, she thought. Donall deserved better. 'Look, I would have called, after we, uh, got together, but I just – I didn't think you would want to see me like that.'

Donall watched as Fay's words came out in a rush and her eyes dipped away from his. She was baring her mind for him.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

'It's okay. I could have too, you know, but -' He shrugged, spreading his palms.

As she lifted her head, squinting a little in the sun and grinning at him, he knew it wasn't over, that he was still attached to this woman. 'Are you – are you in a programme, or something, then?' It wasn't quite what he'd wanted to ask.

'Aye.' She looked rueful as she confessed. 'I haven't touched any of the stuff for – well, since the memorial service. No drugs, no booze, only the occasional cigarette.'

'I would have picked the drink over the cigarettes.'

Fay laughed at that, surprised into joy. He wasn't judging her. He wasn't disapproving and distant; he was pleased.

'Would you, uh, get coffee with me sometime?' she asked. 'The recovery people say it's good to find people, to, like, reach out...'

Donall hesitated. She looked so vulnerable, so pleading. But it wouldn't be right, to start something now. She didn't seem to have moved far enough back from the edge for him to want anything more than coffee.

'Aye,' he said. 'I'd like that. And Fay' – he paused, trying to find the words – 'if you need someone, you know, when you're craving. I can be there, as a – a friend, if you want.'

She hugged him, then, throwing her arms around him and, the shock of it tingling through him, pressing her lips to his neck. He was surprised, almost alarmed. He turned his face away, but he still held her. This was what he had wanted, this easy affection, her body warm and solid against his.

'A friend,' he repeated faintly, breaking away.

'I know,' she said. She didn't know if she was disappointed. 'I'll – I'll text you.' She turned away, desperate to leave before she did something stupid. Whatever they were building felt too fragile, too delicate, for her to hold too tightly. It wasn't until she was already home that she realised she hadn't asked about Dia. Her friend hadn't been responding to texts. Fay wasn't sure if it was just her Dia was avoiding, if she was busy in a good way or because she was stressed.

Dia was thrilling to the summer. It seemed like she'd missed it last year, and this time she spent as much time as she could outside to make up for it, in the rain and the wind,

and in the odd days of sunshine too. Their flat didn't have a garden but she could cycle up to the Creagmuir, or walk to the park or the churchyard. She sketched there, learning the contours of things she'd never noticed before: bits and pieces in her parents' garage, the crumbling wall by the church, a seagull eating chips. She drew in pencil, occasionally charcoal, wondering how she'd ever thought of giving this up, even temporarily. She sketched quickly and furtively; soon, she knew, Mary would come to call her home. There she could only really use her few watercolours while Mary practised, while her murky music reverberated through the flat. Then, Dia let the colours fly. They blended for her now, and sometimes what she produced what exactly what she'd intended; sometimes it was even good. But the paints still weren't fully under her control. The pigments and contours in her head didn't always appear on the page. Could it be the music, she thought, getting into her mind and distorting what she saw there? She could put on headphones – no. Mary wouldn't like that, and Mary might do anything, when she was upset.

She often was, these days. She didn't like the summer, Dia knew, and it made her tense, on edge. Each time Mary started prowling the flat, restless, a dark flash in her eyes, Dia tensed. It was often something (stupid) Dia had done. Dia wondered if she'd do better if they socialised more, if that would somehow make her a better partner.

'Could we invite people over?' she asked one evening. 'Just – just a little gathering, or something.'

Mary's eyes were sharp. 'Are you really able to organise something like that?' she said. 'It would be a lot of work.' Dia looked away; Mary was right. 'You do not know if anybody would come.'

Dia felt her eyes filling. (Weak.) 'I just thought -'

'You should not.' Mary came over and stroked her hair, curling her fingers at Dia's nape. 'You should allow me to take care of things,' she said.

'I guess,' Dia said. She didn't want to be weak any more, she didn't want to give in.

'You *guess*?' Mary said. There was a dangerous edge in her voice. Dia heard it, she knew the risk, but she couldn't help herself, she just kept talking.

‘I’d just like to see Fay more, you know? And Donall. It seems weird that they haven’t been over.’

Mary tugged at her hair. ‘I could take you out to see them,’ she said slowly. ‘If they want to see you.’

‘Can I ask them?’ There was a pause. ‘Please,’ Dia added.

‘If you must,’ Mary said. ‘But do not be disappointed if they say no,’

Dia said nothing. She touched her head where Mary had pulled her hair and wondered what her friends would say. She started with Fay. As she sent the text, a cloud shifted outside, and the sunlight hit the screen of her phone, blinding her. She wasn’t used to such brightness.

When Fay finally met Dia, Mary was there. Fay wasn’t sure if her surprise and annoyance were justified. People did that, didn’t they, brought their partners along. But as she sat down to greet them both warmly, making an effort with Mary, Fay was shocked at how out of it Dia was. She had thought that after the memorial, after the pain of losing Iain had eased just a little, Dia would slowly begin to come back to life. But they started by talking about the weather: just scratching at the surface, not trying anything more than that. When Fay asked about her painting, Dia gave a quick shrug and glanced at Mary.

‘I’ve done a little,’ she said. ‘Not – not like usual, but a few.’

‘And are they up at the Creagmuir?’ asked Fay. ‘Are they selling?’

‘No,’ said Dia. ‘Not these ones.’

‘They are not of the sea,’ Mary explained. ‘The tourists only want that.’

Dia nodded in agreement, not meeting Fay’s eyes.

‘I might get to do some theatre stuff,’ Fay tried. ‘At the library.’ But neither of them seemed interested. Mary started talking, in her careful, precise way, about her work, her music. It felt like an evasion, and Fay wondered what from. After a while, Mary went to the bathroom. Fay touched Dia’s arm, and she flinched.

‘Are you all right, hon?’ Fay asked.

Dia glanced towards the toilets. ‘Yeah, fine,’ she said.

‘You sure? You’re dead quiet.’ Fay took a breath. ‘I’m here to see you, not Mary.’

There it was: a flash of fear in Dia’s eyes, as she looked over Fay’s shoulder. Fay turned and saw Mary striding back towards them, her face contemptuous. Her dark eyes blazed with anger above the silver glint of her necklace, but when she saw Fay looking it vanished, like summer rain. Fay shivered. When Mary reached them Dia beamed tremulously at her.

‘I think we should leave,’ said Mary. She made a show of looking at her watch but Fay knew it was just that: a show. She was going to take that rage she’d seen bubbling up to the surface home with her – with Dia. As Mary steered Dia away Fay wondered if it was crazy to think the word ‘evil’, to think of *Macbeth*’s witches and their coercion, of kelpies and their control. Were these just more shadows in her mind, or was there something wrong here?

Donall felt like he was getting back to himself, working with more clarity and being more sociable outside it. At a leaving do for Callum, one of his colleagues, Glen bought him a drink.

‘I’m surprised you didn’t go for that Aberdeen job yourself, Don,’ he said. It had been a big promotion for Callum. Donall hadn’t thought he was cut out for that. Glen grinned at him. ‘Amy’s doing awfy well out of you.’

Donall was surprised. He’d felt unfocused this year: he hadn’t thought he was doing well at all. His mind had been full of Iain, and of K. But he was methodical, he knew, and diligent. Maybe that could be made to pay off, if he was willing to move away. He’d never really considered leaving; he liked his home town. Still, he prayed for guidance, wondering if he should look beyond this place and this level of work.

He couldn’t think about it too much, now. He was going to see Fay. She’d texted him like she’d promised, and they had a date, except it wasn’t a date. Just coffee.

She was waiting for him, made-up and nervous. She stood up when he got there, and Donall paused before hugging her. This new intimacy, the friendship they were building, was still unfamiliar.

‘How’s...’ He didn’t want to say ‘rehab’.

‘Life?’ Fay said. ‘Good. Although no one will pay me for anything.’ There had been a job going at the library, a proper, paid one. Fay hadn’t got it.

‘And the, uh, sobriety?’

‘Aye, still going.’ She picked at the tablecloth. ‘Although I still have cravings. Not like, physical ones. More psychological, you know?’

‘It was a habit, right, something you just did every night, and now you don’t have it.’

Fay looked up, surprised. ‘Aye,’ she said, ‘exactly.’

She was looking at him quizzically, but Donall wasn’t sure he could tell her. It was K he’d been thinking of, how he still sometimes searched her out, on the nights he spent home alone. He was trying to wean himself off, to avoid her lascivious lips and unreal desires, but she usually replied.

‘What’s your poison, then?’ she asked, almost wishing she hadn’t as she saw him blush and turn away. She’d expected him to say, video games, or something, but it seemed there was more to his understanding than that. ‘I didn’t mean -’

‘It’s okay,’ he said. ‘I’d not thought...addiction’s not the word I’d thought.’ He paused. He couldn’t tell her, even after what they’d done in the grass. She’d never meet his eye like this again. ‘Stuff online,’ he said, evasive. ‘I’ll tell you another time?’

She nodded, thoughtful. ‘Are you still doing it?’

‘No. Well, not much. But I haven’t cut her off -’ Donall stopped as he realised what he’d said. He’d exposed himself. But when he looked up, blushing, Fay hadn’t turned away. Her gaze was compassionate. He wanted to explain. ‘It’s this – webcam girl,’ he said. ‘I just...’

‘Can’t help yourself?’

‘Aye,’ he said. He couldn’t believe she was sympathising like this. ‘It’s no good for me, you know? It’s not a real connection.’

Fay nodded. ‘I know that feeling,’ she said.

Donall’s heart slowly stopped racing as they talked about other things. He had told her, about K, about his shame, and she had accepted it. She was still sitting here with him. But she didn’t know what he did to K. How would Fay react if he told her,

sober, about the pain and control, about the calm joy it gave him?

‘You know, I saw Dia the other day,’ Fay said.

‘Oh yeah,’ said Donall, ‘she texted me. How is she?’

Fay made a face. ‘I don’t know. I didn’t hear that much about *her*...’ Their eyes met, and he knew, Fay thought, what she was thinking.

‘Mary?’ he said.

‘Aye. She’s almost domineering.’ Fay shook her head. ‘I thought Dia’d just been busy, you know, in the new place, all loved up and that, but I think she’s...scared?’

Donall could feel a switch flicking in his mind, his police training coming in.

‘Did she – how did she look?’

‘She didn’t have bruises, if that’s what you mean.’

Donall waited.

‘But she looked so afraid, and Mary -’ Fay struggled to find the words.

‘I should text her back, make sure to meet up with her.’

‘Aye. I’ll try to see her on her own, you know...’ Fay hesitated. ‘There’s not anything else we can do, is there?’

Donall knew the statistics. ‘I don’t think so. Just, like, keep track of her,’ he said. ‘There’s never a magic fix with these things. It’s not like your stories.’ He waited for Fay to share his joke, but she just stared past him, like she was trying to remember something. He turned, but couldn’t see what she was looking at. When he turned back she was asking him about work.

What had happened, Dia wondered: why didn’t she want to hear Mary play any more? Maybe it was because she heard her practising around the house so much. It wasn’t fair, whatever the reason. She should make more of an effort. Tonight Mary had a particularly important gig, a ceilidh for the town councillors and the public, a late summer fete. Donall and Fay were going to come along. That was unusual, but Dia couldn’t worry about that now. She was still at home, still in her work clothes; she wasn’t ready. Mary preferred her in shorter skirts and tights, not the trousers she wore to work. She opened the wardrobe to find something to change into, but there wasn’t

much there. She needed to do laundry. She should have done it already, but she was tired. What if she went as she was? She studied herself in the mirror. She looked smart, and it would be fine to dance in trousers, wouldn't it?

Her phone rang, and she was startled into action, in case it was Mary, in case she, somehow, knew. Dia pulled on a skirt, a long one she'd had for years, before answering, but it was only Fay. 'We're here,' she said.

'What, already?' Dia could feel her heart racing. Mary wouldn't want them in the house. Dia couldn't let them in. 'I'll come out,' she said. 'Just a minute.' She made it, scrambling into a coat, grabbing her bag. In the car she felt hot and unready, and immediately they started asking about Mary, about how things were.

'Fine,' Dia said. She felt tears spring up unexpectedly. 'She's – she's good to me.' She forced herself to look cheerful, to lift her head and open her face so they could see she wasn't hiding anything. She wasn't, not really. But it was a relief when Fay started talking about something different, a friend she'd had in Glasgow.

She'd been offered a part in a play, 'a good role, you know, a job,' Fay said. Her partner had made her refuse it because he hadn't wanted her to be away from him in the evenings.

'That's awful,' said Donall, shaking his head as he drove. Dia said nothing.

'I don't know if he ever hit her, but -'

'He wouldn't have to, it's still abuse.' Donall sounded angry.

There was a pause. Dia could feel them staring at her, Fay openly, Donall in glances through the rearview.

'Did she leave him?' she asked.

'No,' said Fay. 'I think they have a kid now.'

Dia didn't respond. Instead she stared out at the cloudy, feather-coloured sky. It was cold, even though it was the end of July, or perhaps it just looked cold. Dia hugged herself, missing Mary's fiery warmth, her protection.

Inside, though, Mary was angry. Dia could see it in her dark eyes, in the curve of her neck as she nodded to them from the stage. They were late. The band were about to begin, and she wouldn't be able to speak to Mary until the break. Dia twisted her hair.

It wasn't her fault they were late, was it? Perhaps it was her clothes Mary was angry at, or Fay and Donall's presence. But Fay found someone to dance with and Donall bought drinks. Dia sat by herself. She watched the band play and tried to calm her mind. The dance changed and Donall was drafted in, Fay only taking a sip of her drink before being asked up again. The next time they danced, hesitantly, with each other. Dia sat still, frozen. The lights were wrong. The band seemed to be tinged with green. Campbell's face was in shadow and he looked grotesque, and Mary...Dia had thought her dress was brown, chocolate, maybe burgundy, but here it looked blood-red. Dia blinked, trying to see clearly, but the colours didn't make sense.

Mary was staring at her. It was the interval already. Dia got up guiltily and went over to her lover, kissing her, congratulating her.

'Why are you not dancing?' Mary asked. Her eyes were hard. 'Is it this skirt?'

'No,' said Dia, 'I'm sorry. I just, I wanted to watch you. I'm tired, after work...'

But Mary wasn't interested. Dia felt her hand tighten around her arm. The fear was there, growing. She couldn't show the pain, she couldn't respond. She squeezed her eyes shut and said quietly, 'please don't hurt me.' Mary dug her fingers in more tightly and Dia gasped. Then, she released her.

'You will wait for me, afterwards?' she said. Dia nodded, miserable, but then Mary kissed her. Her mouth was soft, warm, and gentle, and although the pain in her arm still throbbed, Dia was relieved to be forgiven.

As Mary walked away, Dia felt bereft. She went out, away from the crowd and her friends' inquisitive looks, and found the bathroom. Dia ran a hand over her face, able to relax now that nobody was watching her. But somebody came out from a cubicle. It was Fay, concerned and watching, but it was too late, Dia had let down some barrier, some internal dam of old, rotten wood and she was already sobbing. Fay held her, tried to soothe her. It wasn't enough.

'What's wrong?' Fay asked. 'What is it?'

Dia shook her head, trying to stop the tears, to put back the wall she'd built between her and the world. But it was too late. Everything felt harsh.

'I – I'm okay. It's okay,' she said, taking in big gulps of air between tears. The

music was starting up again. They had to go back. They had to be back there or Mary would see, Mary would know -

‘Is it – was it Mary?’ Fay asked. Her voice was gentle, but Dia just sobbed harder. The thought of Mary’s hard eyes made her weak.

Eventually she pushed Fay away, wiping her eyes and controlling herself.

‘I don’t know what that was about,’ she said, trying to make a joke of it, trying to keep it light. But Fay’s face was serious. She didn’t believe her. ‘I should get back. We should dance,’ Dia said, turning away.

14: reaching out

As September turned, the sea grew wilder. Leaving for her run as usual, Mary was relieved to feel the night air biting: the equinox had passed, and winter would come soon. She pounded the pavement, building up sweat, and felt her body strengthen in the cold. She wanted to keep running, through the town and away into the distance where she did not know the paths. However, she needed money, so as she reached the town centre she slowed, coming to a halt in her usual place, by the music shop. She was gratified to see a few regular customers already waiting.

But as the night went on she did not sell much. The police had increased their presence, scaring a few people off. A few had spent the summer as Fay had, dragging themselves from their dependencies. Their resolve would soon disappear; in the cold and the dark people gave in to their temptations much more easily. The seasons were once again turning to Mary's advantage.

As the sky began to lighten, Mary left, speeding up and enjoying the thrill of

passing by the police station on her way home. But she did not linger. Dianaimh would be waking up soon, and Mary should be there. She was worried about Dianaimh. Before she had been so happy, so docile and sweet. Now she seemed to writhe against Mary, asking more and more about where she was going or what she was doing. It was the light, Mary thought, the high summer daylight which had infected her lover and taken away her contentment. Winter would help bring Dianaimh back to her. It should be simple with her there in the flat. Mary only had to find out what had drawn away the veil of Dianaimh's happiness, then return it. It could not be something to do with that dead brother of hers, not after all this time. Perhaps it was all the people they were seeing now, all the friends and family who surrounded them. Perhaps Dianaimh felt as confined by them as Mary did; perhaps she, too, felt them watching, and passing judgement.

As they ate breakfast later that morning Mary asked, 'are you all right?'

Dianaimh nodded, but she did not meet Mary's eye. She would never have been so secretive before the summer. Mary slapped her, hard, across the face.

'Do not keep yourself from me,' she said. 'You know I am only trying to help you.'

'I know,' Dianaimh said, her fingers brushing her cheek. 'I – I'm sorry.'

Mary had got through to her. That was good. And now Dianaimh was thinking, trying, opening herself up.

'I don't know what it is,' said Dianaimh. 'But you're right – something's different. It's probably nothing. It'll pass, you know?'

'I hope so.' Her voice had been a shade too harsh, and now Dianaimh looked anxious, so Mary stroked her hair. Eventually, after too long a delay, Dianaimh leaned in to kiss her. Her touch was as soft as a breeze.

'I'm sorry,' she said again. 'I'll try to be better.'

That was a start, Mary thought.

Dia did try. She knew she wasn't being fair to Mary. It wasn't her fault she was often angry. It was just her nature, her inner self which was full of a kind of pain. Dia had

known that (hadn't she?) when she'd chosen her. She couldn't go back on that now.

She tried to spend more time with Mary, and to only see her friends when Mary had gigs. As Mary prepared for an autumn wedding, Dia's phone vibrated. It was Donall, inviting her over. He was cooking, like he'd used to do years ago. Or at least, it felt like years. Dia watched as Mary checked her bag and picked up her keys. There was no point in telling her. Dia hadn't even decided whether to go or not yet. And it would only make Mary worry, to know Dia was out, wouldn't it? They kissed goodbye, and then Mary was gone, leaving Dia alone with her decision. Would it really be so bad? It was only a short walk, and she would be home before Mary knew she was gone. She wouldn't lie, of course. But she didn't need to tell. She texted Donall back, quickly, as if she was being watched.

Dia felt her pulse racing as she left the flat. Was she really doing this? In the darkening street she walked, alone, beneath the orange-lit street lamps. Anxiety clawed her: had she locked the door? Were the lights off? She paused as a few drops of rain began to fall, wondering if she should go back. But the rain grew heavier, blurring the pavement behind her; Donall was expecting her now. She looked up at the sky and could see nothing. The water dripped into her eyes, colourless and cold. She hadn't covered her hair, hadn't brought an umbrella, but the rain was exhilarating. She kept walking, as if the rain was driving her on. She let it come down, soaking her, waking her, so that when Donall opened the door to her she was wet and laughing on his front step. He stared.

'It's so freeing,' she said, 'to be out in the rain. And it's not even that cold.'

'You'll be cold in a minute,' he said, pulling her inside. 'I'll get you a towel.'

Dia dried her hair as Donall moved around the kitchen, opening wine, dishing up plates. He turned back to her and stopped, staring at her again.

'What? What is it?'

'No, it's just your hair. It's -' Donall made an explosion motion with his hands, and Dia felt her neck turn cold. She felt the strands, matted and curled. Panic rose in her throat. Her rain-soaked joy seemed, now, like madness. What had she been thinking?

‘It’s actually kind of a good look,’ Donall said. ‘Didn’t you used to have it like that anyway?’

‘Ages ago,’ Dia said, trying to swallow her panic. ‘Do you have a hairbrush?’ She had to fix it before it dried into knots. If she went home like this, Mary would know everything. That she’d been out in the rain, that she’d kept this evening from her. And then what would Mary do to her?

‘Sorry,’ Donall said. ‘I’ve got a comb?’

‘Thank you,’ said Dia, rushing to the bathroom.

Donall watched her go, alert and worried. What could he say, he wondered, that would make any difference? When Dia returned, sleeker and calmer, he only managed: ‘You okay?’

‘Aye, fine,’ she said. She even managed a grin. He responded, not pushing, not asking why it mattered so much. He couldn’t risk her closing herself off.

Dia wanted to forget her fear. She ate, hoping food would help, but her stomach still churned. And Donall was still watching her, obviously wondering about her panic. She groped in her mind for something else to talk about. ‘What’s the deal with you and Fay?’ she asked.

‘I think we’re just friends,’ he said. ‘And, before you say it, that’s actually what I want. You know she was getting pretty into her drugs.’

‘Still though,’ Dia said. ‘It’s a big thing, if you think you’re over her.’ She reached for her wine glass, turning her head, and Donall saw Iain in her features. It startled him. Would he have been having this conversation with both of them, he wondered; would he and Iain and Dia have all been friends? ‘Do you think that’s it then?’ she was saying. ‘You’re ready to move on?’

‘I don’t know.’ Donall hadn’t told her about the night of the memorial service, about the things they’d done in the grass. He didn’t want to talk about it now. ‘That’s what people at work think. Not about Fay, obviously, but they think I should go for a promotion, that I’m ready to, I don’t know, move on up. Maybe move away.’

‘Really!’ Dia looked amazed.

‘I know. I’ve been looking, and there’s not a lot that I want, you know? But

they're right. I've been doing what I do for so long, it's become kind of, uh, not boring but...I don't know.'

'So you'd just leave?' Dia asked.

'I guess so,' Donall said. He hadn't expected it to startle Dia like this. He'd hoped, he realised, for praise, admiration. Was it because of Iain, the other one who'd left, that she was so distressed? He didn't think it was just that she would miss him.

'I couldn't do that,' Dia was saying. Her shoulders shrank at the thought. 'I just...I couldn't.' She looked into the distance, imagining. Then she shook herself, and was back. 'I mean, if you can get something with better pay, something you'd be interested in, you should totally go for it,' she said.

'Aye,' said Donall, 'maybe. I'm looking into it, anyway.'

The conversation moved on. Dia found she wasn't hungry, she couldn't stomach the food any more. She drank more wine, although she wasn't sure she really should.

'I'm thinking of having a party for Halloween,' Donall said. 'But I don't know if it's a good idea.'

'Why not?' asked Dia.

'I don't know. I just never have before.'

'Well, I'll come,' she said. Then she stopped, frowning. 'At least, I'll try.'

Donall thought again of how agitated she'd been when he'd suggested moving away. He realised too late that it wasn't the town she'd struggled to imagine leaving.

As Dia walked home she was no longer exhilarated. She had time. She would be home first, so she could make herself look presentable, turn on the TV. Maybe she could get out her paints and pretend she'd been doing that all evening. Mary didn't have to know. But that would be so deceptive. The secrecy had seemed like a good plan, a way to protect Mary, but now the reality was closing in. Dia couldn't keep this from Mary; she would be angry. Of course she would. She had every right to be (didn't she?). Dia had lied to her.

She let herself in to the dark flat, relieved that Mary was not yet home. It had been fun, to see Donall, to eat and talk and laugh, like they'd used to. It had felt normal.

The light went on. Mary was there. Dia dropped her bag, her keys. She stooped to pick them up, to put them away, but stopped. Mary was coming closer, her eyes hard.

‘I’m sorry,’ Dia heard herself say, ‘I’m so sorry.’

Mary grabbed her by the hair. The strands were still damp from the rain, and Dia closed her eyes in shame.

‘For what?’ Mary asked.

‘For not telling you. I thought – I thought you’d only worry,’ she said. She cringed away from Mary, feeling the pain before it came, wondering where it would land.

‘*That* is what you are sorry for?’ Mary dragged her to the middle of the room and stood behind her, one hand in her hair, the other on her shoulder. Her fingers dug in, and Dia flinched against the pain before she could help herself. ‘Do *not* move,’ Mary said, tugging at her hair.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ Dia said. Her voice was faint, constricted by the angle of her neck.

‘What are you sorry for?’ Mary asked.

‘For, for not telling you.’

‘What else?’

Dia couldn’t think, she didn’t know. This was why she deserved it, this was why Mary punished her. It had been selfish to go out; she hadn’t thought. She hadn’t thought of Mary.

‘I shouldn’t have gone out wi-’

‘Yes,’ Mary said. ‘You should not have gone out.’

Without telling you, Dia had been going to say. But Mary didn’t want her to speak. Mary let go, pushing Dia away, and for a moment, after the awful pulling at her scalp Dia felt weightless. She surrendered, in that moment, to whatever would happen, whatever force would act on her next. She hoped she wouldn’t feel too much of it.

Mary’s muscles tensed as she hit Dianaimh. With one part of her mind, she aimed her blows: one to the cheekbone, and then, as she doubled, one to the stomach. She pulled Dianaimh up and against a wall, relishing the motion as her head arced back to

hit the wall. She hit her again, lower in the face, in a different part of her abdomen. It was disciplined, controlled; her rage, at least, followed her command. But another part of her mind was racing, whirling, frantic. She had been regaining control; she had been managing Dianaimh well. And now she had gone out, alone, in secret. Had she been doing it all along? Had Mary really been deceived? She knew Dianaimh, what she wanted, what she needed. She was sure she did. Every little movement was obvious, the way she cringed away from Mary's blows, the way she relaxed into the lighter ones, hoping that would be it. Mary could read it all, like a filthy neon sign. How had this happened? How had she been so blinded?

Slowly, her rage spent itself, like fire, like a wave. Dianaimh's delectable face was red and purple, oozing blood as disgusting as her deceit, Mary thought. A hot bubble of anger lingered within her, and she hit Dianaimh one last time, in the face, bloodying her knuckles on the broken skin already there. Dianaimh moaned, and began to sob. Mary let her go, watching her slide down onto the floor.

Dia felt Mary crouch beside her, and tensed, wondering what else was to come. The fear in her was dulled, blunted by the pain throbbing across her body, forcing one eye shut. She wasn't sure she could move; she knew it would hurt if she tried. She stayed where she was, weak. She couldn't stop the tears, the weeping that wracked her, shaking her already aching body into deeper pain. She saw a shadow in her peripheral, blurry vision. Mary's hand, again. Dia started. But Mary only stroked her hair.

'Now,' Mary said, and her tone was gentle. It was over, Dia thought, relaxing towards Mary, towards her forgiveness and her warmth. 'Tell me everything,' Mary said. Coughing, doing her best to wipe the blood from her face, Dia did.

Dia wasn't answering her phone, so Fay scowled, and texted Donall instead. She was jumpy and anxious; she needed someone to reassure her. She finally had an interview for proper, paid work. She didn't know how she'd do. On her application she'd written 'medical problems' to explain the gap in her employment. She knew they couldn't ask about it, but she worried anyway.

It was another waitressing job, in a cafe smaller and drabber than the one in

Glasgow. With a final glance at Donall's encouraging response, Fay steeled herself on the threshold. She remembered her actor's training, and relaxed her shoulders, lifting her chin as she entered. It was busy, she noticed with surprise: there were friends having lunch, old men with tea and papers. The manager, Sam, was laid back and friendly. They sat at one of the tables, and Fay let her spine relax into the chair. She didn't want to seem too uptight.

'Now, can I ask you about your past experience?' he said, flicking through her CV. 'I know you had a gap there, but -'

'It was drugs,' Fay said. She regretted speaking almost immediately; the guy had only been asking about her other work. But she'd done it now. Sam hesitated, nonplussed by her outburst. 'I, uh, I was in a bad way for a while there,' she said, unable to meet his eyes; instead she scrabbled in her bag. 'But I'm all good now,' she said, showing him her five-month token and a wavering grin, trying to hide her despair. It had felt like a release, to tell the truth, but she knew she wouldn't get this job now. Sam was just nodding, appraising her. Fay waited.

'So about your work experience,' he said. Fay stared at him as he carried on as if nothing had happened. She answered as best she could, just waiting for it to be over.

'Right,' he said, finally shuffling his papers into a pile and making ready to leave. 'How soon can you start?'

Fay tried to swallow her surprise. 'Uh, as soon as you like,' she replied.

'I'll just have to call your references, but do you want to come in, say, the day after tomorrow, for a wee trial?'

Fay couldn't speak. He actually wanted to hire her, after she'd told him the truth. She nodded, of course, agreeing to anything. Her references, she knew, would come through – she had someone from the job centre, and Becky from the library. She would be fine. It was unbelievable. As she walked home she tried to tell herself it was real, that she'd really got at least a provisional offer of paid work. Maybe she'd be able to support herself again, without resorting to... She saw some women handing out flyers by the costume shop, dressed up as slutty cats and witches. Fay wouldn't have to do that kind of thing, maybe ever again. One of them approached her, saying something about

Halloween, still a couple of weeks away. Fay beamed sweetly at her and took a flyer; she could afford to be nice, now she didn't have to play that kind of part any more. They weren't much different to Donall's webcam girl, Fay thought: titillating people for money. At least she – whoever she was – was upfront about what she was doing. Although Fay didn't know, really, what that was. She could only vaguely remember their night in the grass; people didn't usually get into what they actually liked the first time anyway. What did Donall ask for, she wondered, from this webcam girl? But she shouldn't be thinking about that, not now that they were friends, she reminded herself.

The next day, her trial shift went well. She remembered how to do this work, how to be cheerful and patient and careful. She would do well here. She wouldn't fuck it up like she had in Glasgow. As she signed the contract, she wondered if she could find somewhere around here that would let her act. For now, she just needed to earn a living. She wanted to be able to go out, maybe eventually move into her own place. But if she got to know more people here, if she let herself become embedded in the town... The thought still scared her, but not as sharply as it once had.

She threw herself into her new job, taking on all the shifts she was offered unless it clashed with her library work. At the weekend, she even covered for someone else at half an hour's notice. Once she had been the one to make those desperate requests; she liked being on the dependable side of that negotiation now.

Towards the end of her shift, Donall came in. Fay felt her heart jump, her face brighten. She'd texted him about the job, wanting congratulations; she hadn't thought he'd actually come see her. He waved at her awkwardly and didn't sit down. Grinning, she went over, with her best waitress face on.

'Would you like me to get you a table, sir?' she said. It was strange, the way he reacted: a small start, like she was pricking him.

'I'm not sure,' he said, running a hand through his hair. 'I, uh, I mostly came by to see how you were doing.'

'I've got another forty minutes,' she said, glancing at the clock. 'I can't really take a break til then.' She looked sorry, awkward – as awkward as he did. He straightened.

'I can wait,' he said, 'if you're free after that.'

‘Sure.’ She grinned again, and got out her pad. ‘And what can I get for you?’

Donall watched her move around the cafe, confident and friendly. She looked professional, with her hair pulled back in a ponytail, her face only lightly made up. He realised he’d always thought of her waitressing as slightly sexual, as a service performed. He’d never seen the reality before.

When Fay was finished, she took off her apron and shook out her hair. Should she redo her lipstick before going over to Donall? But he was watching her; he would notice. She went over just as she was.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘They’re closing soon.’ She didn’t want them watching her, either, these people she didn’t yet know, and making assumptions about her and Donall.

‘Where are we going?’ he said.

‘I don’t know.’

‘The pub?’ It was the only thing he could think of, although he knew it wasn’t really appropriate. ‘I mean -’

‘I think it’s okay,’ she said. ‘But one of the less, y’know, alcoholic ones?’

Donall laughed.

‘I don’t know if -’

But Fay had stopped to read a sandwich board. ‘What do you think of this?’ she said. It was advertising a photography exhibition in the basement of a new frame shop. ‘Does this look good, or really shite?’ she said. ‘I’m not sure I can tell.’

Donall studied the image. It was black-and-white, atmospheric: a church above a cloudbank. When he looked closer, the clouds seemed to be cotton candy, about to be eaten by a shadowy mouth.

‘It looks worth a shot,’ he said. ‘Do you want to give it a try?’

‘Definitely,’ said Fay. ‘I mean, culture, in this town? We’ve got to. But it’s closed just now. Next weekend, maybe?’

‘Aye.’ Would he get used to making plans with Fay like this, without stress, without anxiety? It still seemed luxurious. ‘We should invite Dia,’ he said. Fay looked hurt. Had she thought it would be a date? ‘I mean -’

‘She hasn’t replied to my texts for a few days,’ Fay said. ‘I know she does that,

but...I don't know.'

'I'll ask her,' he said. 'See what she says.'

In the pub, Fay told him about the costume shop girls. She didn't quite manage to put it into words, her triumph at not being them. Donall thought she was being patronising.

'No,' she said. 'I just mean, that's what I was doing last Christmas, you know, that elf thing. And it was bad for me. This is better, even if it's just cafe work.'

'Hey – you could manage your own cafe some day,' Donall said.

'God, I hope not,' she said. Donall looked startled. He had been trying to be kind, she realised. 'I know I've been doing this for years, waitressing, but I'd much rather work with theatre, even at the library or something, than in the cafe.'

'You'll find something,' Donall said. 'Uh, sorry. That sounds like a platitude. It wasn't meant to be.' It seemed so easy, to show her how difficult the words were for him: easy, and unexpected.

'Do you know what you're going as yet, for Halloween?' Fay asked him. He'd already invited her to this party he was having.

'I might just go as myself,' Donall said. 'Or, like, pick a police detective from a film and wear a suit, you know?'

'Oh come on,' Fay said. 'You've got to do something good. It's your party.'

'What are you going as, then?'

Fay thought about it. She hadn't dressed up since the elf job; she didn't really want to be sexy like she always was. She wanted something real.

'Maybe I'll be a witch,' she said. 'But, like, a proper, pagan one, you know?'

Donall remembered her fairies, and her drug-fuelled belief. He wondered how much of it lingered.

Dia read Donall's text about the exhibit, knowing she wouldn't go. But she looked it up online while she was at work (while she could relax). The black-and-white photographs weren't what she wanted; they were too tortured and bizarre. She wanted reality, at the moment. She went back to her computers without replying. At home that evening her

phone went again: Fay was asking, too. Mary wasn't watching her, but her hands trembled as she typed a response. 'Sorry, I can't make it then! Let me know how it is,' Dia said. She even put a smiley face at the end.

At the weekend, it was just Fay and Donall. She wondered if she should have invited other people, to show that she wasn't trying to make it a date. But Donall seemed happy. He was finally comfortable around her. They went down the stairs at the frame shop and wandered around, separate but together. The pictures were varied. Most were surreal juxtapositions like the one on the sandwich board.

'Are these done digitally?' Fay asked.

Donall studied the labels. 'No,' he said, 'apparently not. She seems to set different shots up then develop them a certain way, like, overlapping.'

'I didn't know you could do that,' said Fay.

There were a few portraits at the end of the gallery. These weren't surreal, but: 'they all look like they're in such pain,' Fay said. She seemed intrigued. Donall swallowed, thinking of K. The photographs here were of tortured faces, agonising over something unknown: an old man seen from above, a woman's face, close-up. And – a man tied up, his arms stretched out above him; a woman, suspended, her body curled back to make an O. Both figures' eyes were closed, their faces peaceful above their contorted bodies. Fay stopped, fascinated. Donall wanted to get away; this was too close.

'What do you think of these?' she said.

Donall took a breath. 'I like it,' he said, before he could think. 'I mean...' He'd meant to say something arty, something about the contrast between the man's pale muscles and the thick, black rope. But he was blushing, now, obviously discomfited.

'This is what she does for you, isn't it,' Fay said, 'your webcam woman?' Fay's voice was low, but not low enough. Donall didn't want to do this in public. There were other people here, talking, milling around. He nodded, once, hoping that would make Fay drop it. Her eyes slid away, back to the images, and he wished he'd said no. He'd exposed himself, and she didn't like what she saw. Whatever they'd been building – this friendship, this link – this would make it crumble.

‘Is it the pain you like, or the restriction?’

Donall wasn’t sure if he’d heard her right. She wasn’t looking at him; she was still looking at the bondage in the pictures.

‘I, eh...’ Donall swallowed. She was still here. Was she really still interested? ‘It’s the control,’ he said, as quietly as he could. ‘Being able to, uh, to *demand* the pain.’

Fay looked at him, then, but he couldn’t meet her eyes. He hadn’t wanted her to see that part of him, his shameful desires. But she put a hand on his arm, and he glanced up.

‘It’s okay,’ she said.

Donall shook his head, dumb. She seemed to think it was no big deal. She must not understand, he thought, she must not realise what pain really meant. He looked in to her eyes, wondering. Was the recognition he saw there just in his mind, or was she really -

‘The gallery and shop will be closing in fifteen minutes,’ a voice said.

15: samhuinn
samhainn
samhain

Fay didn't know what to make of Donall's revelation. She had touched something in him, something he hadn't wanted to share. And of course, they hadn't talked about it afterwards. They should have done. She should've said something better than, 'it's okay'. But he'd looked so uncomfortable. Fay hadn't wanted to cause him more pain.

She got into her costume slowly. She still wasn't sure it was right, but it was all she had now. She could always change into something more party-like later on. The grey woollen skirt had come from a charity shop. The shawl was an old blanket, the boots and black t-shirt her own. She had a black witch's hat, too. But she hadn't decided what to do with her face. She didn't want to go full witch and wear no make-up at all: she wanted to look pretty, despite the costume. Maybe she shouldn't want that, even though every other woman probably would. Checking her phone, she wondered what Dia would do. Her friend was still not replying. Fay wasn't even sure she would be there

tonight.

As she picked over her make-up she remembered Iain's party, a year and a half ago now. She had spent so long doing herself up for that: hair removal, make-up, even buying that dress. And now... Was this witch's costume and the minimal, eyes-only face she was putting on a come-down, or some kind of growth? She felt better, stronger now than she had done then. She wasn't sure if she looked any different.

Dia was terrible at make-up. Luckily her bruises had faded, and the cut on her face had mostly healed. Mary helped her with her eye makeup, black mascara making her eyes look bigger amid the smudge of dark face paint around her eye. She was going as a ghost, covering her face and neck in white. The marks on her face were hardly noticeable under the paint: no one would recognise them for what they were.

'Are you ready?' Mary was smiling from the bathroom door. She looked good, as always, in her long black dress, the same one, Dia thought, as she'd worn to Iain's memorial service. Mary wasn't really in costume; only a pair of plastic fangs marked her out as a vampire. Dia felt childish in her white cotton top and skirt beside Mary's slink. But she told Mary she was ready anyway. There was no point arguing now. And it was enough that they were going at all tonight. Usually Mary shied away from Dia's friends, from large groups, but she had seemed amused that Donall was having a party. Dia had only mentioned it hesitantly, expecting to be rejected (again), but Mary had decided they would go. Dia felt a stab of lightness as they left the flat and walked through the dark together.

Fay rang the bell, and Donall answered, bullwhip in hand.

'I didn't know it was *that* kind of party,' she said. Donall flushed, and she wished she'd said something nicer.

'It's not – hold on,' he said, reaching behind the door. 'I'm Indiana Jones,' he said, putting on a fedora and posing with one eyebrow raised. Fay had never seen him pose before.

'That's a good look,' Fay said, going in. She poured herself a lemonade and held it

as if it were alcohol; she didn't want to have to have that conversation tonight. She wasn't early. There were a few people she knew from school here, already in groups. They weren't interested in her. But she would make an effort; she wouldn't be the one to bring Donall's party down.

'How's it going?' she tried, catching one of the guys on his way for a top-up. His name was Andrew, she remembered.

'Aye, fine,' he said. She could see him thinking, why does she want to talk to me?

'What is it you're up to these days?' she asked. As he told her about his work teaching high school biology she found she was managing, asking the right questions, eliciting responses. She was interested, too. These people had stayed from the start, or they'd soon come back.

'What about you? I thought you were in Glasgow?' he asked. Fay looked away. This was the hard part.

'Aye, I was. But...it didn't work out. I was acting, you know, but there, there just wasn't enough work. So I'm working at a coffee shop in town just now.'

She felt herself talking faster, babbling to cover her shame. But the guy nodded.

'Aye, lots of folk found that,' he said. 'I tried to get a job doing actual biology but' – he shrugged – 'I wasn't really good enough. Teaching's grand, though, now I'm used to it.'

Fay felt her face lifting. She'd barely spoken to this man since school and here they were, sharing their failures, lessening them. It was almost easy.

Donall kept opening the door and introducing people to each other. There were colleagues and school friends, church people and neighbours. He hadn't realised how many people he knew. It had been a long time since he'd had a party. He thought of Iain, of helping him plan that party for his homecoming. The boat had been Iain's idea, of course, but Donall had done the work of booking it. That should have annoyed him, but Iain had just been like that.

The doorbell rang again, and Donall put on his hat to answer it. Mary and Dia stood there, black and white.

‘Evening,’ Donall said, tipping his hat. ‘What are you?’

‘I’m dead,’ said Dia. Mary just bared her fangs and hissed.

‘Right. Good to see you guys, Dia,’ he said, as they came in.

Mary had wanted to do more than hiss at Donall. He seemed irritatingly in control in his costume: ready for a fall. Or perhaps it was just the pull of Samhainn, the tug of the wild at her spirit that made her fractious. Inside they were greeted by Fay. No, Mary thought, *Dianaimh* was greeted by Fay. She threw her arms excitedly around her friend and berated her for not being in touch. Dianaimh was responding poorly, Mary thought. Her obvious anxiety was heightened by her face-paint, and she kept glancing at Mary. Mary intervened, putting a hand on Dianaimh’s back, smiling at Fay.

‘Are you still looking for work as an actor?’ she said.

‘Not right now,’ Fay said. ‘I’ve got enough to be getting on with.’ And she turned straight back to Dianaimh. Mary pulled her lover away.

‘We must get a drink,’ she said. ‘What would you like?’

Fay scowled at Mary’s back as she moved effortlessly, beautifully through the room. The room was filling up, and people were starting to get drunk. Fay watched them, envious. She wished she could be as reckless and uninhibited as they were. She wanted a drink. Standing by the booze, she tapped her empty cup and wondered if it would really hurt. It hadn’t been booze that was the problem, not really. She could have one. Couldn’t she?

‘Hey.’ It was Donall, gregarious with drink. He tapped her cup with his whip.

‘We out of fake booze?’

‘No,’ she said, almost laughing with relief. He had seen; he had stopped her. She poured herself juice, mixing it like she was making a cocktail. Donall was still standing beside her, watching – watching over her, she thought. She looked up at him, wondering if he could feel it, the depth of her gratitude.

‘Thank you,’ she said. Donall shrugged. She wanted to kiss him, to show him, properly, how much she appreciated what he had done for her. But he only wanted to be friends now. She looked away, awkward, and was relieved to hear her name being

called. Becky from the library was holding out her arms for a hug, and Fay grinned in spite of herself. It was nice to be wanted. It was a surprise, too, to know that she had made new friends here.

Dia was enjoying herself. It was fun, to be out, to be surrounded by people. She missed Mary, occasionally, as they were separated by the crowd or drawn into different conversations, but it didn't seem (she hoped) to matter too much. It was dark, too, so it wasn't hard to hide her face.

'You're a great phantom,' Donall told her, and she grinned at him. She had to be careful not to raise her cheeks too far, in case her cut opened again. But she could grin a little.

'Good party,' she told him. 'Iain would have been impressed.'

'I don't know,' Donall said, but Dia could see that he was touched. She hoped it wasn't hurting him, to talk about Iain.

'He would have taken it up a step,' Donall said.

'Aye, he would have had a ridiculous costume.'

'Like a creepy pumpkin man.'

Dia laughed at the image, surprising herself. 'I don't think so,' she said. 'He would have wanted to look dashing. He would have been a pirate, or a highwayman, or something.' For her the thought of her brother was a comfort, not a pain. Their memories and imaginings were like glowing embers, giving a faint, cheerful warmth.

As the party went on, Donall relaxed. It was going well, he thought, as he moved around, pouring drinks, making everyone comfortable. He wondered how Fay was doing. She had been anxious about coming out, he knew. But when he found her talking to Becky, the wife of one of his colleagues, she was happy and animated.

'I'd definitely be interested!' Fay was saying.

'We'll have to see if the funding comes through, but it would be good to have someone we know doing the cataloguing.'

'Wine?' Donall offered to Becky.

‘Aye, please,’ she said. ‘What do you think of Fay as archivist, Donall? We might be able to get her a job.’

‘That’s great,’ he said, wishing he had more sincere words. This was what Fay had wanted, he knew. He hoped it would work out.

‘Oh no,’ said Fay, grinning. ‘It’s working with folklore, you’d hate it.’

‘They’re just stories,’ he said, not wanting to bring them down. ‘Metaphors, right?’

‘*Just* stories?’ said Becky. ‘But stories are what we live by.’

‘And it could all be real,’ Fay said, ‘or real enough.’

Real enough for what? Donall wondered, but he was distracted by Mary, taking the bottle from him and pouring herself a glass. Becky turned away to speak to her husband.

‘Thank you,’ said Mary, handing the bottle back. She didn’t move away, just stood, sipping, watching him glower at her. ‘Are you telling Fay all about your proclivities?’ she said with a fanged smile. Her voice was loud, and her face was full of triumph. Donall didn’t understand. Then it dawned on him: she knew about K. Donall couldn’t believe it. How could she know? And who would she tell? There were people within earshot, people who wouldn’t be as understanding as Fay. Donall’s heart sped up as his mind filled with rejections: his boss, his minister. They could all shut him out for this.

‘I can tell her for you, if you are too *tied up* in your thoughts,’ Mary said, relishing Donall’s discomfort. How had she found out? Was she - ? Donall shivered under his costume as he thought it: had it been Mary, as K, mocking him online? Was that all it had meant?

‘What are you talking about?’ said Fay. Mary smiled again. This would wipe the confidence off the girl’s face. ‘Do you mean the bondage and stuff? Are you into that too?’ Her tone was bland; she showed no surprise. Mary had not expected this.

‘He could lose his job for what he has done.’

She was right, Donall thought, beginning to panic. This conversation was so far out of control.

‘I doubt it,’ said Fay. ‘He’s safe about it. At least with me, he is.’ She looked so unworried, Donall thought, so calm in front of Mary’s growing rage.

‘You will not mind when I tell your new boss, then,’ Mary said. Fay shrugged, sipping her drink, and kept her anger hidden. Mary couldn’t threaten her friends like this.

‘Mary?’ Dia’s quavering voice was raised above the party’s noise. Her voice didn’t used to be so weak, Fay thought. She felt something snap in her mind, and saw her own hand lift. She grabbed Mary’s arm. The woman had to be told that she was out of line.

‘Mary, listen, you -’

But Mary jumped at her touch, knocking Fay’s cup to the ground, and Fay was startled into silence. She grabbed Mary again, this time at her neckline. She just wanted to speak her mind, and make sure Mary listened. But before she’d realised what had happened her hand had torn away Mary’s shining silver necklace.

Silence fell. Again – always! – they turned to look at her. They stared, and the bitch was glaring. The place where her necklace had been was bare and exposed. Mary’s anger was rising, rising in her gullet. The fire she had fought for so long, releasing only in controlled, directed bursts, was going to overflow.

‘Just go, Mary,’ said Fay. ‘Leave us in peace.’

Mary heard herself snarl. Fay did not flinch; she did not back down. But Mary felt as though her strength had been broken along with her necklace. She had no energy for a fight. Instead she turned on her heel and left them behind, the watchers, Donall, even Dianaimh. She would return for the other one, Fay. She would break her bones.

Dia felt her heart squeeze as she saw Mary’s anger. But it wasn’t directed at her. She was leaving, pushing through the crowd and out the front door. What was going on?

‘Mary?’ said Dia, but here was a quaver in her voice.

‘Dia,’ said Donall, ‘Dia, wait -’

But she ignored him. In the street she had to stop, blinking under the bright streetlight. She had expected total darkness. (Stupid.) ‘Mary!’ she called, rounding a

corner. There: Mary was striding down the road, her black dress pressed into her flank by the wind, her hair billowing behind her like a mane. Dia stopped, but Mary had seen her. She rounded on her.

‘Dianaimh.’

She sounded harsh. Was she crying? Dia couldn’t see her expression. Is she angry with *me*, Dia thought?

‘Mary, are, are you okay?’ she said. ‘I’m so sorry about your necklace, I’ll fix it. I’m sure I can fix it for you.’

Dia stopped. She was having no effect. She was closer now, and could see Mary’s face. She almost whimpered as Mary stared down at her.

‘Look, we should get off the road, the -’

‘How could you.’ Each word felt like a blow. Dia swallowed. ‘How could you let them do this?’

‘No, no, I didn’t, I didn’t know.’ Dia felt herself cringing away, and tried to stand up straight. ‘Wasn’t it just Fay?’ she said. ‘Mary, tell me what happened?’

‘What happened!’

Mary took a breath. She could have smiled; that dumb, petty expression these people always wanted from her. She could have smiled at Dianaimh in this moment of calm, because she knew what was coming. It was like a wave about to turn. There was no stopping now. The molten rage inside her bubbled over, and for once, it was welcome.

Dia saw Mary reach out to her and let herself relax, hoping it was for solace, for the comfort of touch. She was slammed, hard, into the car parked behind her. The alarm started blaring, and Dia felt tears spring to her eyes. It was pointless, to cry, when it was her fault. She shouldn’t have persuaded Mary to come out, she shouldn’t have brought her here. She tried to say sorry but she could do nothing. She was nothing, under the full force of Mary’s rage.

‘You did this,’ Mary spat, through the sound of the alarm.

‘I didn’t – didn’t mean to,’ Dia tried. It made no difference. Mary hit her, and Dia gasped with the pain. But that had been a gentle blow, she knew. Mary was just

warming up.

‘You did this. You made them do it, that druggie bitch and her sex-starved boy.’

Dia stared mutely up at her, trying to stay upright. Mary hit her again, and Dia felt the cut on her face split open. She tried to shield herself from the blows and understand what Mary was saying, but her words didn’t make sense.

Dianaimh was frowning at her. Mary disliked that.

Dia felt the blow as a force of nature, throwing her backwards, shattering the car’s window. Pain blossomed at the back of her head. Mary was still muttering, but she was beyond Dia’s comprehension now. It was as if she was speaking a different language, a terrible one Dia didn’t want to understand. Maybe this wasn’t her fault, she thought, about the necklace. She felt a silence around her, and wondered where the alarm had gone, whether anybody had heard it.

Mary watched Dianaimh slide down the side of the car and lie, broken, in the street. Mary’s body was taut, hurting. Hungry. Nothing had changed, in all these months. All her work with Dianaimh was for nothing. She was no safer.

‘Hey!’ someone shouted. ‘What’s going on?’ Mary stiffened. Even now they would not leave her alone. It was time to go, she thought. Time to change. She glanced at Dianaimh, bleeding on the ground. She was unconscious but breathing – she would live. Am I not merciful, Mary thought bitterly.

She blended into the night as she left. From the flat she took only what she could carry. She would not miss these people. It was only the thought of her band, of Campbell and the others, which gave her pause. They were like her; they had welcomed her, fully. But Mary knew that they would understand. Even Campbell, whose fiddle she was taking, would not begrudge her it. With that fiddle, and the money she had made, she would find somewhere else. She would be someone else.

When she was clear of the town, she lifted her head, and ran.

Donall wasn’t sure what was happening. Well, he knew that Fay had broken Mary’s precious necklace. It was there in her hand, glinting. Mary was gone, angry and vindictive, and Dia had followed, like a lost, kicked puppy, unaware of the danger.

Donall blinked. Was there really danger? Did he really think Mary would hurt Dia?

‘All right?’ Robbie was asking. The police officers might have been drunk, but they still knew something had happened.

‘I don’t know yet,’ Donall said. He looked around for the most sober person. ‘Chris, come with me.’

‘Something to call in?’

‘Not yet,’ said Donall, decisive. ‘But if you don’t hear back from us in ten minutes, aye, get a car down.’

They went out into the night, calling for Dia, but the street was silent. Donall paused, taking in the quiet. He didn’t know which way to start looking. A car alarm blared in the distance, then fell silent. He went towards it; any direction was better than none.

Chris noticed something, and sped up. When Donall reached him he was crouching in the middle of the road beside what looked like a pile of clothes. He stood and grabbed Donall before he could see. But he already knew what he’d find.

‘It’s Dia,’ Chris said. ‘Donall, you can’t. You can’t. She’s alive, at the moment.’

Donall felt himself nodding. He knew the protocols. But he wanted to hold her, to be there with his friend. He tried to push past Chris.

‘The ambulance is on its way, right? We’ve got to keep the area clear.’ Chris held him by the shoulders. ‘Donall. She’ll be okay.’

‘I’ll have to call the Machlins,’ Donall said, his voice gruff.

The ambulance came and took her away. Everything was in motion, now, and once again, Donall would be excluded. He was drunk; they were all drunk, although not enough to ruin the scene, to stand in the blood spatter or lean on the car.

A car pulled up, and his boss emerged. Others were with her, with police tape and lights.

‘What happened?’ Amy asked.

‘Abuse,’ Donall said, the word heavy on his tongue. ‘Dia Machlin’s off in an

ambulance, her girlfriend Mary -'

'The one from the beach?'

'Aye. She did it, they're looking for her, but -'

'You saw it?'

'No.'

Amy raised an eyebrow at him.

'I saw Mary leave my house, angry, and Dia ran after her.' He grimaced. He should have done something about the abuse before, he should have seen it, and known. 'Trust me, it was Mary.'

Amy nodded. 'You go home,' she said. 'Take the lead in the morning. We'll find her.'

Back at Donall's, the party was over. The lights had all been switched on, and sober, uniformed officers were taking statements. Donall couldn't see Fay. He phoned the Machlins, trying to explain, trying to offer solace. But it was the middle of the night, and their only remaining child was broken and bloody.

Karen sobbed down the phone. Then Craig's voice came on: 'Donall, did you know?'

'No,' he said. He wondered if it was true. He'd been worried about Dia, concerned that Mary was too controlling. He'd just never thought she would really hurt his friend.

After Donall hung up he sat on the stairs, watching the still-open door, drained. He found himself praying, deeply, truly, for Dia. It didn't seem to matter so much about Mary; he just wanted Dia to survive.

Fay appeared, her face bleared. He beckoned to her and she sat down with him, letting herself cry.

'It's my fault,' she said.

'No.'

'But that necklace must've meant something, she took it so seriously, that I broke it, and -'

‘Hey,’ he said, putting a finger on her lips. ‘No. Don’t let yourself think that. Mary didn’t have to harm Dia like that. *She* made that choice, not you. You’ – he pulled her to him – ‘you did fine.’ He was supposed to be comforting her, but as her warm body leaned into his, he felt calmer himself.

‘That’s not a really very encouraging,’ Fay said, sniffing.

‘Well, all right,’ Donall said. ‘I won’t try to help.’ It felt bizarre to share a grin at a time like this.

‘Thank you,’ she said, ‘for -’

And then she kissed him, like it was something she did every day. Donall surrendered to her, letting her claim him as they waited for the morning.

16: winter light

Everything was bright. Just a pure, bright numbness beyond definition. And then, colours. A hint of dove-grey, a touch of sky. No darkness, anywhere.

‘Is she awake?’

Faces: vanilla, calamine, cinder rose. Chocolate-coloured hair, falling. Dia blinked. It was Fay. Her parents, too; and Donall. She tried to reach up to them, but she couldn’t, her limbs were lead.

‘Don’t try to move too fast, hon, it’s fine.’ A hand was warm on hers.

‘Mary’s gone,’ Donall added, and Dia felt herself sigh.

‘Shh!’ That was Fay. ‘Don’t talk about *her*.’

‘What? Shouldn’t she know?’

They were talking in whispers, but Dia could hear every word. They sounded far away.

‘You’re safe now.’ That was her mother’s voice. Dia let her eyes close.

When she opened them again, the colours were deeper, the lines of the ward more defined. But there was something missing. It felt like a tooth had been removed, a gap that wasn't painful so much as strange, tender, and new. Each time she closed her eyes she wondered, would that nagging emptiness still be there when she woke? And every time she opened her eyes, it was.

Donall searched for Mary. He knew the others were relieved that she had disappeared, as suddenly and as dramatically as she'd come, but it wasn't enough for Donall. He wanted to see her locked up.

At work, he used every resource he had. She didn't have a passport, not even as Margaret McAskie, so she couldn't leave the country; Donall made sure the ports and airports were looking for her anyway. Back home, they searched her and Dia's flat. They knew she'd been there: they found the dress she'd been wearing, draped on a chair, and in the middle of the floor, her fangs. They tried to work out what was missing, what she might have taken. But Dia wasn't well enough to answer those questions, and they didn't have time to wait for her injuries to heal. All they could ascertain was that she'd taken her fiddle.

Donall interviewed her band. Siobhan Hill was relaxed and unhelpful. She didn't know Mary that well, she didn't know where she might go. Ben Bochdan was irritating: too cheery, and too interested in the goings-on at the station, to focus properly on Mary. He didn't seem to care what might have happened to her. Donall remembered Fay's hallucination about the fairies, about the band being weird folkloric creatures. It made a sort of sense, as a metaphor. Their attention certainly seemed far away from the real problems Donall was facing. Maybe they were just selfish, Donall thought.

Finally he saw Campbell. His first name was Nick. As Donall asked him the routine questions of where he'd last seen Mary, what he knew of her, if he knew where she might've gone, the old man seemed faintly amused. He said almost nothing. It was infuriating.

'You know she took the fiddle? That was yours, wasn't it?'

'It was.'

‘And that doesn’t anger you? She stole it, basically.’

The man’s dark eyes flickered. He smiled.

‘She has a right to it,’ he said. ‘She needs it more than I.’

‘What do you mean, she needs it?’

The man said nothing. Donall knew he wasn’t getting anywhere, but he kept trying.

‘What does she need it for?’

The silence stretched on until Donall got up and left, slamming the door behind him.

Dia’s body healed quickly. She would be released from hospital soon. The knowledge was like a cold weight on her stomach. She would be released back to her flat, back to Mary’s space. She couldn’t imagine it, being there alone. She still didn’t really believe Mary was gone. This was a symptom, apparently, or at least that was what the psych people kept telling her. She was recovering as well as could be expected from the abuse. They’d used that word, abuse, to mean the control, the putdowns, the constant fear. Dia didn’t know how she was supposed to recover faster.

Her family came by every day. They talked about the weather, the early Christmas decorations her dad hated, the bookings they’d already received, the changes they were making to the house.

‘We’re thinking of doing up your old flat at the side of the house,’ Craig said.

‘But we want to wait until you’re out,’ her mum added. ‘So you can help, you know?’

Dia nodded. She wasn’t sure she could speak. She’d loved it there, at home but not really in the house. She knew she couldn’t go back.

‘You can stay there again, if you like, or in one of the other rooms, you know.’

‘I know.’

‘Or we can help you move things around in your flat, get rid of *her* stuff.’

Dia tried to look grateful. ‘Thanks,’ she managed. ‘I’ll see.’

‘Would you like us to move your painting things up there?’ Craig asked. ‘We

could put it in the spare room, all set up for when you get out.'

'No,' said Dia. 'Not yet.' The spare room: the one Mary had locked. She felt a lump in her throat. Did Mary still have her keys? Had she taken them with her, biding her time? Dia pulled the thin hospital blanket closer to her, and wished she knew where Mary was.

Donall was still searching, although every day that passed made it less likely he would find her. He hadn't even worked out how she had left the town, but he did know that she'd left. Every shop and business knew her face, her story. If she appeared, Donall would know.

He took the inventory of the flat to Dia.

'I'm sorry to have to do this,' he said. She just nodded, and took the list. 'We took pictures, as well, in case that would help you remember.'

It was peculiar, to see her life so itemised. There were two sets of keys. Dia sighed, almost crying with what she thought was relief. She knew she would change the locks anyway, and add bolts, a chain; she knew she would become a fearful person. But it was a sign that Mary wasn't coming back. She hadn't wanted to keep even that small tie to their home. Dia would probably never see her again.

'No,' she said to Donall. 'There's nothing missing. At least, I don't think there is. She kept a lot of her stuff in her – in the spare room. I wouldn't know if...'

'It's okay,' Donall said. 'It's all right. I can come back another time if you'd rather.'

'No. I'll do it now.' She looked at the list, at the clothes they'd found. 'She wore a hoodie, to run in,' Dia said. 'Oversized, you know? It was green, forest green. She would have blended in with the trees.'

'I don't think that's on the list. I'll make a note.' Donall knew that, whatever she had been wearing was probably long gone. But it was better than nothing. They might find it, discarded; she might even be foolish enough to still be wearing it. Remembering her face, those intelligent, dark eyes, it seemed unlikely.

'Did you say she ran?' he said. 'Did she have running shoes?'

‘Aye, trainers. She kept them in, uh, the spare room.’

‘Right.’

‘Sorry, I don’t think there’s anything else. That’s weird, isn’t it, that she wouldn’t take anything?’

Donall didn’t know what to say.

Fay, too, came to visit Dia, trying to bring joy. Dia never asked for anything, but Fay needed something in her hands every time she arrived, so she brought magazines and games, anything she could think of. She brought a plate of something from the cafe each day, too, a mystery snack which always came with a story. A chocolate chip brownie, the last of a batch, which Fay had taken just before a customer came in asking for one; a huge chunk of cake the size of Dia’s head which had been given away because the blueberry flavour had turned it a funny colour. Another time she only got a tiny sliver of lemon meringue pie because Fay had had to share it with someone else, whose son was sick.

Dia liked the stories, and the desserts. She would eat them while Fay chattered on about her day, her work. Sometimes she spoke about Donall.

‘I can’t believe you two,’ Dia said, ‘after all these years.’

‘I know! And I had to kind of chase him down.’ Fay laughed, delighted. Dia was glad her friend was happy, blooming again, even here. Her joy was infectious, as it had always been, and Dia felt herself lifted up by it. The knot of fear that had sat in her stomach for so long that she barely noticed it was loosened, somewhat, by Fay’s good cheer.

‘I’m going home tomorrow,’ Dia said suddenly.

‘What! That’s great,’ said Fay. ‘Isn’t it?’

Dia shrugged. She still didn’t know what she would do, where she would sleep. Her parents had offered to change the bedding, even the furniture, but Dia wanted to do it herself.

‘Hey, hon, I know you’re going to think this is weird,’ Fay said, ‘but’ – she took a breath – ‘I’ve made friends with these pagan people. They could give you some

protection, if you want.'

'Protection? Against what?' Although Dia already knew what Fay meant.

'Against – well, just against anything, you know...

'Magical.' Dia couldn't keep the disgust from her voice. She didn't want to hear Fay say she thought Mary was some kind of shape-shifter, some slimy thing from the sea. Dia knew she'd been a person, a woman; she'd been warm, of flesh and blood.

'Look, I know you don't believe in it, and, to be honest, I'm not sure if I do either. But there's a guy who makes pretty nice stuff, and if you want it you can keep it with you, or put it up around your door, you know, in case...' Fay stopped. She knew Dia wouldn't mind, exactly, if she just said the name, but she couldn't let herself. It seemed dangerous, as if she could be summoned; as if by thinking about her too much she might somehow be brought back.

'She's not coming back,' Dia said, and her voice was shaky, full of incipient tears. 'Besides, what's your friend charging for this protection?'

'Nothing, for you,' Fay said, but Dia could see she was hurt.

'Sorry. He's every right to charge if he's making the stuff, obviously.'

'I just thought I'd say, in case you did want something.'

Dia thought about it. What would it mean to allow superstitions into her mind? It felt like a weakness, like giving in to fear; it was the same as changing the locks. But maybe both were sensible precautions.

'I guess it can't hurt,' she said. 'Is it pretty, this stuff, can I, like, say it's a decoration?'

Fay beamed at her. 'I'll ask,' she said.

Dia left the hospital with her parents, in clothes they had brought from her flat. She kept Fay's sprigs of rowan hidden in a bag. That wasn't a conversation she wanted to have with her Mum and Dad. When they got to her door, she realised she didn't have keys.

'Oh,' said Karen, 'here.'

Dia let herself in, wishing she were alone. The flat felt deserted. Emptiness was in

the dust motes shining in the air, in the quiet of the place. She put her parents in the living room and hoped they'd stay there. She needed to make this space hers again, to move around the flat, touching things, remembering. The door to Mary's, no, the spare room was open. It let in a shaft of pale daylight. Dia paused on the threshold, the fear rising. She looked back. Only her parents were there, nobody else. Still, she stayed on the threshold, looking in. The room was a mess: paper on the floor, scuff marks on the carpet. The police had been here, she remembered with a shock: they'd been in her home, they'd gone through her things. Would she really take this room and paint in it? Or would she move the bed, put it here, under the window, and sleep in what had been wholly Mary's space?

Dia left the door open and turned away. She would go in another time.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' her mother asked.

'Sure,' Dia said. She went into the bedroom next: their bedroom. Here it seemed as if nothing had been touched, as if the past few weeks had all been a dream and Mary might walk in, lovingly, at any moment. Dia's heart squeezed, and she tore at the bedding, throwing it on the floor. It wasn't enough, it couldn't be enough. She grabbed the mattress, her fingers hurting as they gripped the edge and lifted it, tipping it up and over itself as if changing their sleeping place could mean something. It still wasn't enough. Maybe nothing would be enough. Dia's panic rose as she looked around the same room, with the same shadows and colours, the same contours. She felt a rush of energy, and pushed at the end of the bed, moving it, pulling it out of its place; she tugged at the frame, kicking the bedding out of the way, until it, too, turned, and stood at ninety degrees to where it had been. The room already looked different. Dia would wake up in the morning with a different fall of light on her face and would know, before she opened her eyes, not to expect her lover's warmth beside her.

'Are you all right in there?' Her father was on the other side of the door, concern heavy on his voice.

She went out, shutting the door behind her, leaving the mess of bedding on the floor. 'Yes, fine,' she said. 'I moved the bed.'

Her parents nodded, comprehending but not really understanding. Dia let herself

be sat down on the sofa and handed tea; she made herself drink, although her head was throbbing under the bandages.

‘Would you like us to help set up your easel?’ her mother asked. ‘Craig put it in the car, just in case.’

‘I don’t – I don’t know,’ she said. ‘We’d better bring it in, but...maybe tomorrow?’

‘Of course. We’ll just leave it in the hall.’

Dia nodded, wishing they would leave.

‘Are you sure you don’t want us to stay here with you?’ her father said after he’d brought in her painting and leant it carefully against the wall.

‘It’s fine. I’ll be fine,’ Dia said. She hated this protectiveness. They couldn’t help her. They hadn’t helped her, before. She only had herself to rely on (and to blame). She shook her head, trying to get rid of the quiet voice of self-hatred that had always told her she was stupid, lazy, pathetic. She’d been letting it guide her for far too long.

Finally she shut the door behind her parents and leant against it, turning her head so as not to put pressure on her wound. She was alone, alone with her easel and her space. She would paint tomorrow, she thought, she would go back to the light. It wouldn’t be the same as what she’d planned, but it would come. There were darker, redder colours in her mind as well, but perhaps that was a different painting taking shape. She would let it lie, for now. She had time.

She took out the rowan sprigs, turning them in her hands. The berries were bright, red and poisonous. Was it ridiculous, she thought, to put them up? Or did it make sense?

There was a scuffling at the door, and Dia started. She reached up, heart pounding, to put the rowan on the lintel. When it was there, between her and the noise, she shrank back, hoping and waiting. The scuffling stopped. It had probably been a neighbour’s dog. Her fear, slowly, faded, her palpitations growing softer. This wasn’t going to go away, she realised, this fear she’d become accustomed to. It wasn’t going to disappear easily.

She went to bed, too exhausted to find fresh sheets. Instead she just pulled the

duvet over her and closed her eyes. The duvet smelt of Mary, of winter and the sea.

Donall worked through the winter. He called everyone he could think of around the country, reminding them this was important, pleading with them to look again, to make sure. There were sightings: a dark-haired woman by the bay in Aberdeen, a strange fiddler seen across a stream in the Borders. He went, every time, driving across country in all weathers. Each time he found nothing; not even a rumour of where the reported figure might have gone. The places didn't seem to be in a sequence, so he couldn't map her route and try to predict her. Most of the sightings probably weren't her anyway. Each time he returned his boss's face was a little grimmer and less forgiving. He told himself it was worth it, that now the spate of homeless disappearances had stopped he could devote more time to this. He kept searching, doggedly, over Christmas and through the new year. In late January he came back from another fruitless journey – the report had been near Falkirk this time – to find snow covering his town. Amy was waiting for him at the police station, her arms folded.

'Anything?'

Donall just shook his head.

'Right,' she said. 'That was your last.'

'But -'

'No. You've been at this for months, Donall, and we need your head to be here. That Mary woman is in the wind. Let her go. If she ever comes back we'll get her then.'

She was right. But Donall didn't want Mary to become just another missing person, another story he didn't know the ending to. He didn't know how he was going to tell Dia.

Dia had been painting. All winter, she'd painted light, and now the canvas glistened with it. The pale colour fell across the picture in a glossy swathe, darkening at the edges; but it was the brightness that stood out, the touches of silver where the metallic gleam brought it to life. It came from beyond, from over the top corner of the canvas, as seemed to flow down and across it, onto the upturned face of a woman. Her lips were

parted in a half-smile, and her hair streamed like blown straw behind and below her. Her eyes were open, staring up and out, away from the light. Dia frowned at it, dipping her brush into pale cadmium one last time. She picked a spot at the bottom of the painting, in the indiscriminate dark of the woman's shirt; *Dia*, she wrote, in small strokes. Then she finished the word: *Dianaimh*.

The doorbell rang, and Dia let Fay in, bubbly as always, and carrying cake.

'Woah!' said Fay, looking at the canvas in the spare room. 'Is it finished?'

'I think so. Finally.' Dia wasn't really looking at it. She knew it wasn't original; she also knew it was pretty good. She pushed a strand of hair from her face before asking: 'so, what do you think?'

'So much light!' Fay's voice was breathless. 'I think it needs some black in there.' She turned and grinned at Dia. 'Seriously hon, it's great.'

Dia beamed back at her. They sat down with tea and Fay's cake – red velvet this time – and Dia saw Fay hesitating over a question. She swallowed, and hoped it would go away. She knew it wouldn't be one of the questions she asked herself: how could you let her control you like that, why didn't you see what she was doing, why didn't you fight back? Fay would never ask anything so direct. At least, Dia didn't think she would.

'What's up?' she asked. Better to get it over with.

Fay looked serious. 'You're not going to like it.' Dia felt her breath escape. The fear clawed at her, and her scalp tingled. Fay looked startled at the change on her face.

'No! God, no, it's not -' Fay stopped. She still wouldn't speak that woman's name, even though she was gone, even though Donall, too, was starting to accept that she'd vanished. It was better this way, with her gone: like Fay's dealer, and that woman Donall had told her about, the one he'd been watching online. Fay still couldn't believe they'd all been the same person.

Dia waited, tensed, for her friend to tell her whatever it was. She tried to breathe, to relax. It was hard work. But Fay meant well, she told herself. It wasn't her fault, all of this.

'It was your painting I wanted to ask about.'

Dia looked over at it, visible through the doorway. She'd taken off the door to the

spare room, put it on the pile for burning at her father's annual bonfire. The flat seemed lighter, without it.

'Not that one. The other one, you know, of Iain? Your mum said you'd gone back to it?'

Oh. That painting was in the spare room too, facing away, with the photograph she was working from was pinned to its corner. The canvas was still mostly empty; she'd only managed a shoulder, the contours of a suit, and a few streaks of hair. Between them the face was still blank.

'I'm working on it,' said Dia.

'Yeah?'

'A little. Now I've finished this one... But it's slow going.'

'Well, aye. I mean, of course it is. But it's so great that you're doing it,' said Fay.

Dia grinned. She reached up a hand and rubbed her fingers along her neck. Her hair, cut pixie-style, was no good for twirling her fingers in any more.

'I like your hair like that,' Fay said. 'Are you going to grow it out?'

'I don't think so. It's just about evened out now, after the stitches.' She shrugged.

'It's cute,' Fay said. 'We'll find you a woman in no time.'

Dia's grin felt tight. She didn't want anybody else; just living with herself was enough. Her fingers ran over the scar. It had healed now, and her hair covered the mark, but she always knew where to find it.

'How are things with Donall?' she asked, changing the subject abruptly.

Fay blushed. 'They're great. Really great. You know he's still looking for jobs all over, and I'm doing this theatre volunteering now as well as the cafe work, so it's all really up in the air. But we're good.'

'And you're all moved in? That's, uh, amazing.'

Fay glance at Dia for a second before she grinned in response. It was impressive how she had bounced back, Fay thought – or how she was trying to. Then her phone buzzed. 'Oh,' she said. 'Is it okay if he joins us, briefly? He's -'

'Course,' Dia said.

When he arrived he looked worn out. Once he'd eaten some cake he turned to

Dia. 'I'm really sorry,' he said. 'Amy's asked me to stop looking for Mary.'

Dia nodded. There were waves in her mind, soft and gentle. 'Where do you think she is?' she asked.

Donall looked into her earnest face. 'She's gone,' he said.

'I *know* that,' Dia said, twisting her hands. 'I'm asking where you think she's gone *to*.'

Donall couldn't answer that. He'd told her all about his failed searches. It was so easy to think that yes, she'd gone back to the sea, to Hell, to wherever she'd come from...but she had been real. That smirk, her low voice; all that strength. 'I don't know,' he said aloud.

'Maybe she's dead,' said Fay. She seemed unconcerned, just shrugging under his gaze.

'I miss her,' said Dia quietly. She was looking into the distance, unseeing. Fay frowned, about to object, but Donall nudged her gently. They stayed silent. Eventually Dia brought herself back. 'Not, you know, the skull-fracturing bit,' she said, her laugh quavering. 'But she really was good to me for a while there.'

'If she comes back, *I'll* kill her,' Fay said, stabbing her cake.

'Thanks,' said Dia, with a grin.

After Fay and Donall went home they had dinner in the half-dark. Fay knew he preferred the lights totally off, but she liked the brightness. They compromised on a single lamp.

'Do you think Dia believes?' Fay said.

'What, about Mary?'

Fay nodded. 'It was just the way she asked where she'd gone, as if it might have been, you know, somewhere...else.'

Donall thought about it. 'I don't think so,' he said. 'I'm not sure I do either, you know.'

'I know,' Fay said. 'Me neither, sometimes.'

'Really? But you -'

‘I know. But it’s pretty ridiculous, isn’t it?’

‘Mysterious ways,’ Donall murmured. He expected Fay to laugh, but she just nodded, thoughtful and grave.

‘I suppose so,’ she said. ‘Like the way she just left. She could have hurt me, but she didn’t. It’s like...’ She paused, and put down her fork. ‘What did you do with her necklace?’ she asked.

‘It’s upstairs. Why?’

Fay looked suddenly anxious. ‘I think, uh...can we take it away?’

‘Away?’

‘I just think, and I know you don’t believe it, right, but I think it’s, like, charmed, or cursed or something. Can we not bury it somewhere, or something?’

Donall saw the earnestness in her eyes. He didn’t know if he believed in the kelpie, the *each-uisge*, that Fay was hinting at; he wasn’t even sure he believed in the Devil made flesh. He remembered standing in front of her after Fay had broken her necklace, though. She’d seemed trapped, like her strength was locked away inside her where she couldn’t use it. But hadn’t she just been constrained by the situation, by the people around her, watching her?

‘We can do that, if you like,’ he said.

They went to John, his minister, in the end. Fay stammered out her odd story, their half-belief and fear. The older man watched them keenly.

‘You’re superstitious,’ he said. Donall looked away. Maybe this was a mistake: it was too idolatrous to be afraid of a necklace like this. But then, Fay’s anxiety did make the type of sense that only a minister could understand. ‘Come with me,’ said John. He led them around the manse to the garden, to an old gnarled tree in the corner.

‘It’s a rowan,’ he said, ‘planted by the pagans who lived here before the manse was built. They were often placed at the boundary walls of properties, to keep witches and spirits away.’ John pursed his lips. ‘If you are worried about a pagan danger, I suppose you should use some pagan protection.’

John left them to it, and Fay knelt to bury it. Donall wondered if the thing wouldn’t be better off in consecrated ground.

Later, as they got into bed, Donall pulled her to him, tugging at her hair the way he knew she liked as he kissed her. He didn't take it for granted, this luxury of being able to kiss her whenever he wanted, and knowing that she wanted it too.

'Hey,' she said softly, breaking away and looking up at him. 'Do you think I'm an idiot, for doing all that with the necklace today?'

'No,' Donall said. 'It makes sense, in a weird kind of way. I don't really understand it. But at least we didn't throw it in the sea.'

Fay kissed him then, and pulled him down onto her. She moved his hands to her wrists and felt him grip her tightly. She loved that he accepted her desires, that he shared them. Struggling against him, she knew he wouldn't let her go, he would hold her safe.

'Hurt me,' she whispered. He bit her breasts, his teeth leaving marks. 'Harder,' she told him. She knew he still thought what they did together was wrong, sometimes; she had to make sure he knew that she wanted it.

'Are you sure?' he asked softly.

'Yes,' she said, and as he did, she said it again, in a soft moan: 'yes.'

17: surfacing

It wasn't yet spring, but it was coming. Dia didn't know if it was her new solitude, or if the longer days after the turn of the solstice were seeping into her body, her bones, and helping her live. The air was still icy, and Dia stayed home painting in the growing light. From time to time she added touches to the square canvas, to the contours of her brother's face, but mostly it stayed propped against the wall where she could see it. She knew she wouldn't be finishing it soon. She would keep it by her, keep staring at the photograph and planning the lines of his cheeks, the colours in each iris; she wouldn't let it go.

Instead she started painting darkness. It was going to be a companion piece for the light one she'd completed. It was difficult to paint the dark. The edges became indistinct. She found a shine of silver and steel on the hair, and made the face a shade or two lighter than the background, enough to be seen. But there wasn't much of this woman's face to paint. Dia had positioned her turning away from the viewer, away from

her. Here was another person's features she couldn't fully face, but her hair, her profile, were unmistakable. Below her chin was a stronger glint of silver, the etching of a horse's billowing mane. Dia didn't know if she would ever show this to anyone; she didn't think her friends would understand. She worked on it secretly, adding loving touches until the woman on the canvas was almost finished. Should she add blue to her clothes, blue for the sea? Or indigo, perhaps. But a red would better capture how she'd felt, Dia thought, a crimson or scarlet. Her phone rang, startling her. Donall was calling, from work. Strange. Dia took a last look at her colours before answering. Mary would have wanted red. Yes: incarnadine.

She answered the phone with the chosen paint in her hand. 'Hiya,' she said. 'What's up?'

There was a pause, and Dia turned away from the painting, realising more fully what it meant to have Donall phone her from work. For a moment she wondered if she'd summoned Mary back, if she should slash the painting and somehow destroy her – that was in a story, too, wasn't it?

'Dia, they, they've found him,' Donall said. 'Iain's body was washed up by the tide.'

Iain had been found in the west, on one of the islands. On the boat, with the wind rushing and roaring in his ears, Donall read the preliminary report. There would be no positive identification, no definite explanation: all they'd found were bones, gnawed and battered, and his watch, still clinging on. The report described the damage done; the bites on the bones were probably by the same sea creature which had devoured the organs, the tissue. Donall closed the report, his stomach rolling like the waves. Looking out into the dull sky he could see nothing but wave-crests, glinting. There would be no awakening here, no knitting back together of limbs.

When Donall reached the sodden beach he was directed along the shoreline. The heap of stuff which signified Iain now was covered by a sheet. It looked like a shroud, the final, definite proof of his friend's death. Donall felt a shock of relief.

'The local constable's done the photos,' Amy said. 'But if you want...'

‘No,’ said Donall. ‘I don’t have to look.’ He didn’t want to see the destruction he had read about, wrought by the ocean. They hadn’t moved the remains yet, and occasionally a breaker would sweep further in, and gently rock the shrouded body. It wasn’t only destruction, Donall thought. It was like the waves had kept him for safekeeping, until the people on land were ready to take him back.

As Donall watched, unseeing, the tide retreated further. Finally, the remains lay still. Donall prayed, then, finding the deeper tongue in which he could speak to his God.

At the Creagmuir Dia found her parents sitting in shadow, motionless at the kitchen table. She switched on the light and they jumped. Should she have kept the light off? But she didn’t want to sit in the dark.

‘I didn’t think...’ Craig was shaking, wracked with sobs.

‘I know, Dad,’ said Dia. ‘I know.’ She held him, wiping away her own tears as he swayed in her arms. As she looked across at her mother, she realised Karen looked almost happy.

‘Now we know,’ Karen said, closing her eyes in relief.

After a while, Dia said, ‘we should do something, something for Iain.’

‘Another service?’

‘No. A proper send-off.’ She imagined toasting, cheering, the lighting of fires. ‘Dad, we could have the bonfire early!’ Craig stared at her. ‘This weekend. We could invite everybody, like usual, but have it be for Iain. A celebration, you know, of him, of his life: a proper remembrance.’

‘That’s not a bad idea,’ Karen said.

‘I don’t know,’ said Craig. ‘Isn’t it -’

‘Think about Iain, Dad. What he was like.’ Dia felt herself beaming through her tears. ‘He would have wanted a party.’

Craig sighed, but Dia knew he would agree. ‘I’ll go see what’s in the garage,’ he said.

They built the bonfire out of old furniture and branches, taken from the floor of the

woodland or thrown up by the sea. Craig pulled the door from Dia's spare room out, asking only, 'do you still want this burned?'

'Aye,' she said.

'Better take the hinges off first,' he said, handing her a screwdriver, and she squeezed his arm, grateful beyond articulation.

People started arriving before the fire was built: neighbours with fresh scones and whisky, school friends with crisps and bags of clinking bottles. Donall was there, and one or two of Iain's university friends had come up for the weekend, pale and seeming much older than Dia remembered. Even John the minister came, knocking politely then calling through the half-open door. The house, usually quiet and empty of guests in the winter, filled with life.

Fay and her mother came, too, with wine and pizza. 'You know it's Imbolc, right?' Fay said. 'So fitting.'

'What's that?' Dia said.

'Pagan festival,' Donall said, coming by to fill up Dia's glass.

'It's the start of spring,' Fay said. 'You're supposed to pour milk into the ground, it's called a libation ritual...'

But Dia didn't want to hear it, not tonight. She moved away, taking the food Fay had brought into the kitchen and the wine to the table outside. There was a shout: the fire was being lit. Sparks rose first, and a plume of smoke. Then the flames lifted, eating through the wood and rising, rising. Someone cheered, and a few people clapped, before they remembered the occasion and turned, guilty, to the Machlins. But Dia beamed at them despite the tears on her cheeks, raising her glass which seemed never to have been empty. Karen, who had had several hot toddies by now, gave a whoop; even Craig was grinning.

'To Iain!' Dia shouted, and it echoed through the crowd. Glasses were clinked and salutations murmured around the growing heat. It felt like a muted Hogmanay, Dia thought; maybe there was something in these pagan festivals after all. But it was too early to think about spring. There had been frost on the ground that morning. Dia moved closer to the fire.

Fay was beside her, with tears in her eyes. Dia hugged her, hard, sobbing suddenly into her shoulder. She felt another set of arms wrap around her and turned to see tears in Donall's eyes, too. She flung an arm around each of them, holding on tight.

'Hon, you're killing me,' Fay said.

'Sorry,' said Dia, but she laughed, and the others joined in. It was exactly like before, thought Dia, and it was totally different. She looked around at the people, everyone talking about Iain as they ate and drank and cried and laughed. Karen had brought out some old photo albums, and people were passing them round, remembering, telling stories. This was what that awful service last year should have been like, Dia thought; bright fires and candles, toasts to his memory and laughter. This is how people should be remembered.

Night deepened, and some neighbours began to head home. The flames reached their height, but Dia piled on more branches, more driftwood. She didn't want the light to dwindle, not yet. A few more friends said goodbye, and finally even the hosts went to bed. But the three friends remained, sitting silently by the fire. Donall and Fay had wrapped themselves in blankets, and Dia had a sleeping bag. She and Donall were passing a bottle back and forth, a whisky that was too good, really, to drink straight from the bottle. Iain would have approved.

'Do you remember when you guys were, like, ten,' Donall said, 'and he used to prank you all the time? He'd hide in random places for ages, just to scare you both to death.'

'Oh yeah!' said Fay, laughing. 'I'm pretty sure I hit back at him one time, pushed him right over in the bushes by your house. He was so short, then!'

'You knocked the wind out of him,' Donall said. 'He was mortified.'

Dia took the bottle and swigged. The only sounds were the crackle of the fire and the rush of the waves. 'He was always the first in the sea,' Dia said. 'Every summer. Sometimes he'd go in as early as March, just to be the first. He'd go racing down the hill and across the beach to beat Dad to it. First dip of the year, he'd say.'

There was a pause. Dia passed on the bottle, but none of them spoke. It was

Donall who broke the silence.

‘Were you there that Hogmanay he persuaded everyone to go in after the bells? I was too feart but he had a bunch of friends up from uni and they all went in, totally naked.’

‘Woah,’ said Fay.

‘They all had colds for weeks, after,’ Donall remembered, ‘but Iain always said it was totally worth it.’

‘I can imagine him saying it, just like that,’ Dia said. She took another pull at the whisky.

Late became early, but the sun didn’t rise. The fire was dying, its flames not reaching so far up into the darkness as before. Fay took the bottle and took a single sip of whisky. The alcohol she was no longer used to stung her throat, but she swallowed it. For Iain, she thought. For the time we didn’t have. She passed the bottle to Donall with a gentle look and a jerk of the head. He nodded in return. They didn’t need to speak.

Donall sat with the bottle for a good while before he stood, wiping his mouth with his hand.

‘Hey,’ he said. ‘Hey, Dia.’

She was standing by the cliff edge, watching the waves. He didn’t think she could see them; to him the sea was just a different texture of darkness. When Dia turned, he passed her the bottle. ‘Here,’ he said. ‘We’re away. You finish this.’

‘Cheers,’ she said. She didn’t hear them leave. She could only hear the waves, now, rippling through the night.

In the dark of Donall’s bedroom, their play was as rough and loud as always, but, alone in this house, they could both be themselves. Neither of them had to be ashamed of the noise, or of what they wanted from each other. Afterwards, Fay pushed the handcuffs onto the floor and snuggled closer to Donall. As he held her, as she relaxed, Fay found herself thinking about Iain. I would never have had this, with him, she thought; he wasn’t attentive enough to let me lose control like Donall does. She wondered if the

thought should have surprised her. It didn't: Iain had been himself. Donall, too.

Donall held Fay, rocking her slightly in his arms as they both recovered. He found himself close to tears. Iain, he thought, was finally at peace. Or maybe he had been all along, and it was them, the living, who had needed it to end. He leant his head on Fay's shoulder. It wasn't past, but it was over.

Fay shifted a little in his arms.

'You okay?' he murmured, kissing her neck.

She nodded. 'I was thinking about Iain. Not like that, just -'

'Me too,' he said, pulling her closer. In a moment, he knew, she would break the embrace and stretch. She would get up and go to the bathroom, taking a few extra moments to herself before coming back to bed, back to him. Then, between them, they would find all the sore places on her body, the red places where the restraints had been, the other wounds she had begged him to lovingly inflict, and they would start to help them heal.

At the Creagmuir Dia was still outside. The fire had shrunk down into embers; the embers, soon, would die into ash. But a few cars were starting to pass on the road behind the house. Already, people were driving to work, despite the lingering dark of the morning. The eastern sky was tinged with blue, showing that the daylight was coming.

Dia stood, and stretched. She was starting to get cold, and her scar ached a little. She would have to sleep before she went back to painting. But there was still a little left in the bottom of the bottle. Dia tipped it up, pouring the final drops into the ground. She tried to imagine what Iain would have said to her replacing the Imbolc libation with whisky, but he wouldn't have known about it. He would have thought it quaint, no doubt; he would also have known it was right, because she was doing it for him. He would have accepted whatever ritual it was that she groped for in remembrance.

She walked to the cliff edge and looked out. 'Hey you,' she said. Her voice was carried on the wind, the spray. 'Thanks for the drink. And...' She lifted the bottle high in a toast, a salute, and then threw it towards the western sea. She listened, but she didn't hear a smash – just the rushing of waves. 'Slàinte,' she said to the dark.

bealtuinn
bealtainn
beltane

They were inland, the kelpies, and far from the sea. Their cement-lined canals were no substitute for the habitat they deserved: deep rivers and lochs, winding burns, and – sometimes – a bay. One stared down at the world, keeping its eyes on the people and movement below it, apparently planning its catch. The other whinnied, shaking its shining mane free of all shackles, glorying in the rush of the crisp spring air. Or perhaps it reared up in fear, afraid of the fetters which might once again chain it to the earth.

The kelpies were not real. Their gleam was metal, their origin an artist; there was no mystery here. She knew this. But standing between them, staring up at their hollow metal shells, it did not seem to matter. She had been travelling for months, blending in with the hoards of buskers in the towns she passed through. The music had flowed through her heart and her fingers and she had entranced the passersby, enticing them to come closer. She had smiled through her hunger as people left her small change, and left. All winter she had played, eating when she could, moving on quickly. Her stomach

still growled.

Finally, in the shadow of the kelpies, she sat. Her hands ached around her locked wooden box; her body hurt from walking. Her skin felt tight and old and she shifted, wishing she could shed it like a snake, and inhabit something new. She looked down at the water, at the reflection of the upwards-looking kelpie, the one who sometimes looked free. In the still, artificial water of the canal there was a slight breeze, and the creature's eyes seemed to move. She blinked, and the breeze was gone. She looked away, scowling.

‘Hey – smile!’

She froze. A man was pointing a camera at her. Again, staring. All these people, full of desire. She stood and glared, but he did not leave. She squinted at him in the wind and read his wants. Slowly, with effort, she smiled.

The man took his picture, and came sauntered over. ‘You know these kelpies are all wrong,’ he said. He was not going to leave her alone. ‘They’re supposed to have a bridle, right, a silver thing around their necks? That’s what lets them change shape, what gives them their power.’

The man kept talking, hoping the woman would let him take another picture. She was still smiling at him, and her white teeth shone. She has such murky eyes, he thought. Eyes to lose yourself in. He reached out a hand to the stranger.

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