Starra

Starra

a love story

Michael Jordan

Copyright 2022 Michael Jordan

The right of Michael Jordan to be identified as the author of the work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in a retrieval system in any form or by any means, without permission in writing by the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

This work is entirely fictitious and bears no resemblance to any person, living or dead.

Cover photograph: copyright Picture-Alliance/R. Bowden

Typeset in 11pt. Garamond

In fond memory of Jack

Chapter 1

I discovered Starra, by chance, in somewhat less troubled times. It was during a summer trip with Harriet to the Western Isles, the chain of islands that lies adrift in the Atlantic Ocean off the north western fringes of Scotland and is otherwise known as the Outer Hebrides. Our two daughters, Ellie and Claire, having become largely independent and for whom the prospect of a family holiday had lost its charm, I had booked myself and Harriet into a small hotel in Stornoway on the eastern seaboard of the main island of Lewis. I had remembered about the hotel from visits in the past. For Harriet, that entire trip was probably akin to a rustic stay in the backwoods, but she maintained reasonable humour nonetheless, and peace of a kind was kept between us. It was probably the last occasion when we had, at least tacitly, made a positive effort in each other's company.

I can remember awaking on the first morning to find that the *haar,* a cold unseasonal sea fog, was cloaking land and sea alike. The phenomenon of *haar* in the Outer Hebrides is likely to happen only on one or two days in the year but, perversely, this was one of them. From our hotel window looking out across the waters of the Sound, the cloying mist was obscuring all that it touched, and even the harbour, not a hundred yards distant, was cloaked in its grey veil.

Although the weather on that day was far removed from the cool, rainy, windswept magic of the Western Isles that I love, the romance of these islands, distant, wild and mountainous, forever captures my imagination. We arrived at a time of the year when the main holiday season reaches its peak, and the Western Isles are at their most popular. But with the *haar* threatening to persist, I suggested that we should drive across the moors to the west-facing side of Lewis where the weather might be less limiting. Harriet agreed and we stopped by the edge of a sea loch close to Callanish, a little way northwest from the small fishing and crofting hamlet of Garynahine. While taking in the limited view across the water we had each commented on a small, but rather distinctive island that lay in the distance. The *haar* had thinned enough that the island was visible, though still as little more than a mysterious, ill-defined presence.

One of the whitewashed cottages nearby was unexpectedly advertising light lunches and the pair who owned it were willing to chat. I remember that we discussed the inclement weather, the problems of an intermittent electricity supply, much-promised high speed internet coverage for the Hebrides, the poor fishing season, and the exorbitant cost of peat blocks for the fire. After a while I mentioned the small island that had no name on the map.

The man went to prepare coffee, but his wife seemed happy to make conversation. 'The island is named Starra, which I think is a Norse word, though what that means I simply couldn't tell you.' She laughed drily. 'I hail from Perth, sir, not exactly from these parts.'

While we were having coffee I remember being at first hesitant but then pursuing an impulsive whim. 'I suppose there is no chance of getting out for a trip over there? I guess it's private, but do you know of a boatman who would take us, just to have a look?' It was a casual suggestion more than any

thought-over plan, but as soon as I had spoken of my interest, and without being able to put a finger precisely on why, I detected a change in the man's manner. He seemed to become a little cynical, yet in no way was this transparent, more a subtle shift of attitude.

'I can't say, but I can certainly ask around.' The man went away again and could be heard making a 'phone call. His wife meanwhile sounded vaguely disapproving. 'Starra is a rather strange place. We've been told that some fellow who lives abroad owns it these days, but we've never seen him. I believe it was put up for sale several years ago, and as far as I know that's still the case. What the attraction might be, if any folk were foolish enough to part with their money, I can't begin to imagine. The island is neither particularly large nor, from what I hear, is it of any special purpose.' She smiled broadly and added, 'They say Starra is haunted!'

When her husband returned he passed over a small printed brochure with a colour photograph of the island. 'I'm still looking for a boatman for you. This is from a year or so back, and the details may have changed. You are welcome to keep it if you want. There's a wee bit of a description inside.'

"*Embraced by the waters of a sea loch to the east of Great Bernera on the western side of Lewis, Starra Island has a land area of about eighty one thousand square metres or twenty acres. It is uninhabited but it is stocked periodically with sheep and over much of the island there is good grazing. The rarely encountered machair meadowland on the west-facing shores supports an abundance of wild flowers. In the more central parts the machair gives way to moorland and blanket bog marked by a prominent outcrop of rock. At some time it has been worked by a small community of crofters, and the island plateau includes the collapsing remnants of several stone cottages. At its most northerly tip an abandoned lighthouse has fallen into some state of disrepair. In common with many other parts of the Outer*

Hebrides the island has a protected site of remote antiquity, marked by four standing stones.

The sale was being handled by a property agency based in Inverness, with a local branch office in Stornoway, and the island would ultimately be sold at auction if not disposed of by prior private treaty. The guide price was rather less than I'd imagined it would have been.

The cottage owner was talking again on the phone and this time he returned sounding more positive. 'If you still fancy taking your wee trip down the loch, you may be in luck. There will likely be only a few of the boats running today for pleasure trips because of the *haar*. Malcolm McBain is a local fisherman for the mackerel and the pollack, who also carries a few tourists for boat rides around the sea loch during the high season. I have had a word with him and he tells me he can probably manage something for you today since he's not long-lining at present. You will find he has a small place down by our slipway here. He may charge you handsomely and I can't say if he will be willing to land you on the island.' The man smiled broadly, still adopting what seemed to be a rather cynical expression. 'You may need to watch out for yourself. I find that island folk tend to be rather superstitious, if you understand my meaning, and there are interesting stories to do with Starra. Stuff and nonsense of course, but then as a fellow not from these parts I can probably afford to say so.'

Harriet had been quick to dismiss any idea of accompanying me on the boat. She would be sea-sick and who in their right mind would want to visit some island with a few stupid sheep and then go wandering about in thick mist. She would drive herself back to Stornoway with the hired car, and collect me at an agreed time.

At first I had been unable to locate Malcolm McBain, but eventually found him in a tumbledown fisherman's shack among a cluster of scarcely less dilapidated buildings dotted around near the slipway. A bearded and taciturn islander, McBain seemed vaguely surprised at a request to journey to Starra on such a day, but he made no comment beyond discussing a price and he politely led the way to a boat. The island was still barely visible at its lower levels. Only a rocky outcrop at its highest part periodically stood clear of the mists and for a moment or two it would be bathed in weak sunlight although I could discern little detail. The sea had become almost flat calm, and McBain did not utter more than a word or two during the journey across the sea loch. But to my surprise, I was allowed to make landfall. The state of the tide meant that I could be dropped off onto a rocky shelf that served as a landing platform. McBain gestured to a pathway that ran alongside the shoreline. 'I will suggest to you, Sir, on account of the *haar* that you should keep to this path rather than to risk venturing any distance inland. I'll be back to collect you in an about an hour or thereabouts, if that will suit.'

On that first unplanned visit, I had made little attempt to walk more than a short distance along the shore. I was content to sit on the damp rocks, listening to the sounds of the sea and to the cries of the invisible herring gulls and kittiwakes flying about in the mists above my head. I remember absorbing the surroundings with a sense of quiet satisfaction. I was in no sense envisaging Starra as somewhere to live, but nonetheless I felt instinctively at one with the island. The fisherman had duly collected me, and the rest of the week with Harriet had passed uneventfully.

Looking back on it, that holiday seemed to have been a long while ago, though it was actually just over a year. Shortly after we had got back from Stornoway, and after what seemed an age of bickering and living increasingly independent lives we had

agreed, with a minimum of acrimony, that it was best to go our separate ways.

My name is James Stanton. I had reached my forty-sixth year and as the head of a leading media consultancy in Manchester I had made myself financially secure. By most standards I was fairly affluent and, from day-to-day, I was also no longer wholly indispensible to the continued well-being of the consultancy. Harriet had made her mark over a number of years with a prosperous fashion design business.

Driving away from the domestic familiarity of home towards my rented apartment, it came as a relief that the fraught and increasingly stressful existence that I had been used to was finally ending. But at that moment I'd also drawn no clear map of a way forward. As the strife of our personal situation had multiplied I had realised with increasing regularity that my best expectation of life needed to change from permanent to finite, and with this inevitability in mind I sensed that I must discover some better reason for my existence. I needed to find a purpose beyond devotion to a media consultancy business, and failed relationships. Yet when the deed was done life in the space of a day had become both changed and precarious. I was frighteningly out of my comfort zone.

It was during that particularly depressing September day that I may also have unwittingly made the decision which led me to bidding for Starra. Since first setting eyes on the island it had lain resolutely in the recesses of my mind, tranquil and undisturbed, somewhere that I came to think of romantically as a safe haven, an idyllic refuge. The island was to be my redemption.

It would, however, be some little time before a dream of possessing Starra advanced past wishful thinking, and on that best-forgotten day I'd been largely preoccupied with matters of more immediate and demanding concern. Standing in the roadway outside the door of the cold comfort Manchester

apartment that was to be my future home, and which I disliked intensely even before putting the key in the lock, I needed to shake myself free of reminiscences. I gritted my teeth mentally, and let myself into the apartment. The place smelled faintly of polish and disinfectant. I dropped my baggage in the hallway, made myself a cup of instant coffee and carried it into the small sparsely furnished sitting room with a net curtained window that looked out directly onto the street. A woman walking past with a dog and a shopping bag peered in at me and automatically I stepped back.

I was finding myself contemplating the next critical decision about what to do. In what had become something of a compulsive habit over the months since we had taken that holiday on Lewis, I searched in my briefcase for the now rather frayed Starra sales brochure, and I studied the photo. I found myself retreating mentally, as a means of comfort, back to the foggy day when I had set foot on the island.

Looking around the anonymity of the rented Manchester apartment I was reluctant to abandon reminiscence about Starra. As I'd done from time to time since visiting the island, more on a whim than with any definite sense of purpose, I made a fresh call to the Inverness agents handling the sale in order to hear their confirmation that the island remained on the market. I was also informed that the asking price had been lowered. I sat for a while, contemplating the grey view of the street through the net curtained window, and then acted on an irrational, spur-of-the-moment decision. It was one that was to change my life irrevocably in ways that went far beyond marital breakdown.

I got on the phone again, this time to my secretary, gave what I hoped was a convincing explanation that I would be absent for a few days, and passed her some further instructions. I picked up the baggage, threw it back into the car, locked the apartment and headed out on the long journey north. I slept on-and-off in the

back seat in a rest area near Perth, booked myself onto the car ferry that travels from Ullapool to Stornoway before heading northwest again, and finally, somewhat exhausted, arrived at the hotel where I had stayed with Harriet many months earlier.

In the morning I requested a packed lunch, drove across the winding moorland road to the west coast, and managed once more to locate Malcolm McBain. Although the fisherman was somewhat surprised to see me, I was able to negotiate a further hire of his boat, arranging on this occasion to spend several hours on the island before being picked up. The *haar* was fortunately nowhere in evidence although the sea was choppy and the wind was gusting quite strongly. The entirety of Starra was bathed in weak autumnal sunlight. The sheep, McBain told me, had been taken away for the season and my only companions would be the gulls and the ubiquitous rabbits which had escaped the predations of mink, never introduced to Starra as they had been in other parts of the Western Isles. McBain sketched a rough map showing me the position of the ruined cottages, and of the lighthouse, which stood on the opposite side of the island where the sea loch expanded facing towards the openness of the North Atlantic.

He winked broadly. 'I'll advise you to keep away from the standing stones and the cottages which some local folk considered to be haunted, but don't be looking at me!' McBain was considerably more talkative than he had been on our first meeting. He was enthusiastic about how the whole of the island chain was shortly to receive high speed broadband and how he would no longer need to rely on satellite for getting on the internet for his mackerel and pollack fishing business. I gained the impression that McBain was someone rather more astute than the backwoods islander I had first marked him down as being.

After waving a brief farewell, I watched the fisherman reverse the boat and head back up the sea loch. With the gulls wheeling noisily overhead I followed the pathway that hugged the shore for a short distance until I found a narrow sheep track that I guessed must head inland. Climbing away from the sea, the path seemed constantly to change direction as if following the least difficult route, and in places the tall bracken fronds of the summer months that had largely collapsed across it made progress awkward without tripping over them. The bare rocks were also slippery on the more upwardly sloping parts, but after a short while the track levelled out into the sheep-cropped turf, and I could see the small cluster of partly ruined crofter's cottages lying a little distance away in a sheltering dip of the ground. Out of curiosity I wandered around and through these, sensing the ghosts of the little families who were now long gone but that must have eked out their meagre, hardy existence there in the days that were past. Their presence posed no threat and I chose to sit in the lea of one of the cottages to eat my packed lunch.

The September day was chilly and even through a thick winter coat I began to feel the penetrating cold. But I was content to stay quietly for a while, and to contemplate where, through various at times traumatic twists and turns, life had taken me. The experience of the slow but inevitable breakdown of my marriage had done much to change my perceptions about who I was and indeed what I was. It was not a simple matter of off with old and on with the new. I had reached a state of mind in which the values of domestic comfort and emotional security, whilst not wholly abandoned, had nonetheless receded somewhat into the background. They had been replaced by an unfamiliar desire for some novel challenge, an adventure in my life.

I had also begun to feel sufficiently cold that it was advisable to get moving again, and I was curious to examine the lighthouse. When I set off it was towards the side of Starra Island that faced the open water, rabbits scattering frantically into their burrows at my approach. I passed through the circle of standing stones without dire incident.

On the basis of some of what I'd been told by McBain, the lighthouse complex was in better condition than I anticipated. In the shape of a bulky, fairly short circular tower with an extensive, single storey accommodation building close by, both built of brick, the main lighthouse structure appeared to be undamaged though it was badly in need of paint. The doors were padlocked and the windows of the accommodation block had been boarded up. Someone had thoughtfully spray-painted graffiti onto the lighthouse door. It looked as if it could have some kind of obscure religious symbolism. A large section at one end of the accommodation block that might once have been used as a storage area was open to the elements and inside was an unhealthy, foul-smelling mess, presumably a consequence of several years of occupation by sheep and gulls.

There was evidence that the buildings had been connected to an electricity supply. I guessed that this would have been made possible either with the use of a generator or through the installation of a wind turbine, though neither was any longer in evidence. However, a rusting storage tank was partly concealed around the rear of the accommodation block. Rapping against the metal it sounded empty although peering inside the lid I thought I detected a faint smell of fuel oil. It struck me that with some financial investment and imagination, the buildings could once more potentially be made habitable. Nevertheless if someone was to decide that they were intending to live on the island for any significant periods of time, they might have to dig deeply into their pockets, at least initially. I made my way back

reluctantly to the landing stage and awaited the arrival of Malcolm McBain.

It was obvious that the fisherman's curiosity had been aroused and so I cautiously outlined a possible interest in Starra. McBain seemed surprised. He might have had me down as an inquisitive naturalist or photographer, and when he understood that the interest was a more serious one he made a brusque apology for not having first pointed out that the lighthouse buildings were locked up. As we headed through the sea loch, he gestured back towards the island and fixed me with a look of feigned severity on his face.

'If I may be so bold, Mr Stanton, you must be ooot the game, as we say in these parts, if you're contemplating becoming the new laird of Starra, but if you are thinking of being here as a regular visitor, you will not be wearing out my wee boat, I can tell you that. The mackerel don't have a mind to wait around. And I can also tell you there are only a few from around these parts that will venture to Starra Island.'

'You've got my curiosity up. Is there something else about it that I should be aware of?'

'Did you know that it has been a plague island? In fact that's how many of the local folk still call it. The place doesn't bother me but there are plenty that keep well away from it. You will have seen those ruined cottages, I'm sure. The people that lived in them perished every one of them from a terrible sickness. The ghosts, or what we like to call the *bogles* in these parts, still walk there, or so you will be told.'

'Well, I have to tell you that I ate my lunch beside one of the cottages and the *bogles* seemed quite friendly.'

McBain laughed loudly. 'It's a lot of folklore and tittle-tattle, Mr Stanton, but it's said that one of the reasons the lighthouse was abandoned was that the keepers could not be persuaded to stay for long enough! No matter. I can see you are the stout-

hearted man who puts all of that to one side, so I think I should also tell you that there's perhaps a different way of getting yourself to Starra. Did you know of this?'

'No, I didn't. I guessed that the only way to reach the island was by coming across the sea loch.'

McBain waved the idea away, shaking his head. 'You will have been across the island to view the lighthouse, you've told me. There is still all that glass and suchlike at the top and then one devil of a lot of bricks holding it up. Did you ever wonder how the builders got the stuff out there? I can tell you they did not carry any of it over in a wee boat of mine or anyone else. When they built the lighthouse, they also constructed a small quay and a causeway from the Lewis mainland, and it's still present. It will be a wee bit slippery these days no doubt because it's not been used for a fair number of years, but it becomes clear of the water for a few hours a couple of times a day apart from when we have the very shortest of the tides.'

'I missed that completely when I was wandering around.'

'If you had been able to get yourself into the lighthouse and ventured up into the lamp room, you would perhaps have looked out and then been able to see the line of it beneath the shallows. It's not immediately beside the lighthouse, which is facing away from the land, but it comes up nearby. The causeway is joined on the far side with a track, or what's left of a track across the moor, that then connects with the main highway that you will have travelled out from Stornoway.'

This was a new and unexpected piece of information and it was also serving to put in place the last piece of a wild idea that had slowly been taking shape. I sensed that it was about to mark the beginning of another eventful journey. I had given little thought to the practicalities and possible consequences, but by the time that I had returned to the relative comfort of the hotel

at Stornoway, I was sufficiently certain of what I intended to do. If I could find a way, I was damn well going to buy Starra Island.