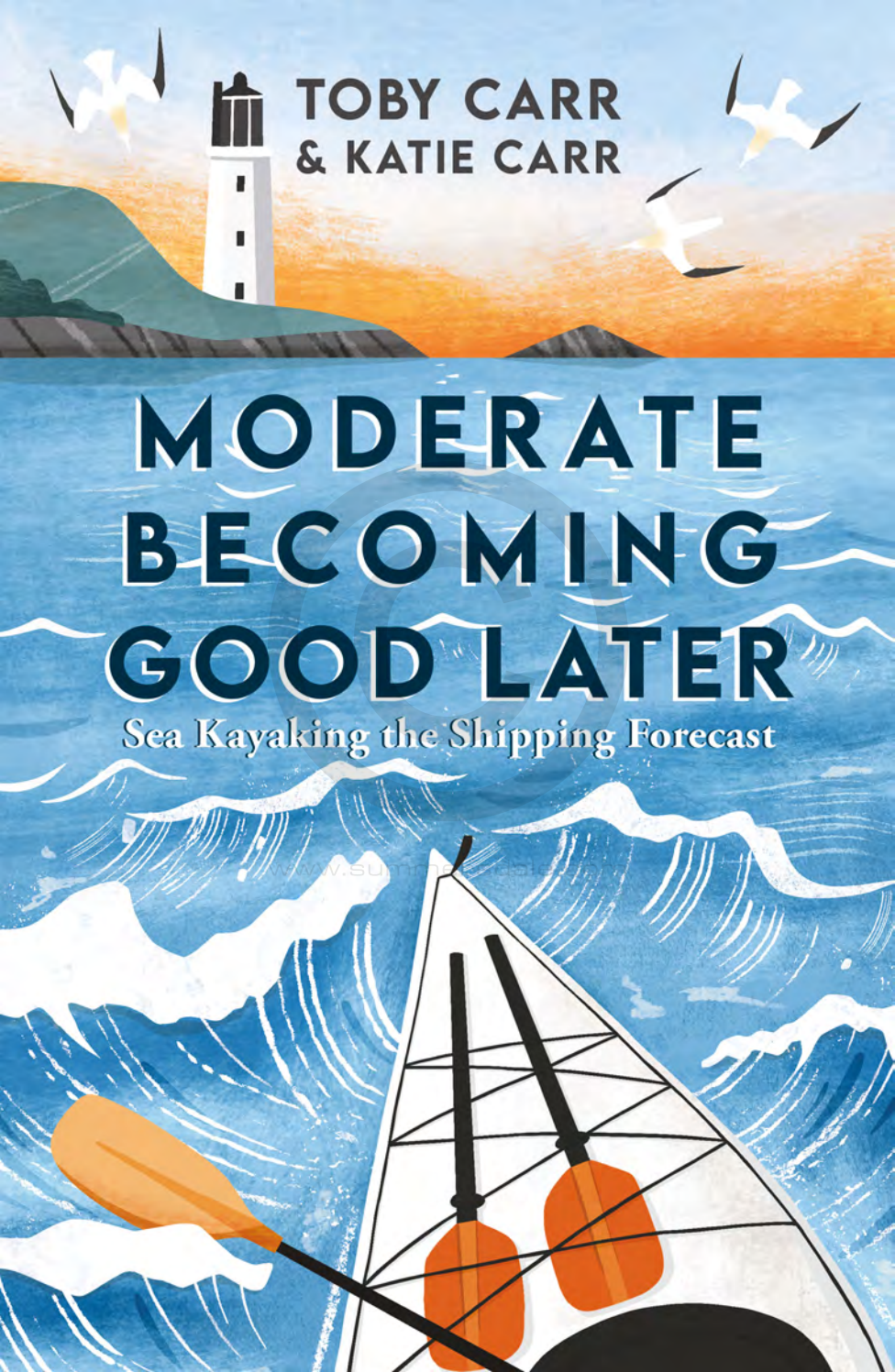
TOBY CARR
& KATIE CARR

MODERATE BECOMING GOOD LATER

Sea Kayaking the Shipping Forecast



'You can almost taste the sea air reading *Moderate Becoming Good Later*. This incredibly moving story weaves together one family's story and shows the sense of hope and love that can be found through adventure even when things don't go according to plan. It's a privilege to be allowed a glimpse into life offshore Britain through Toby and Katie's words.'

Elise Downing, adventurer and author of *Coasting*

'The perfect book for our times: from tragedy and stormy seas, come hope, connection, and elemental awe. Exceptionally beautiful and moving, a book that conjures connection to people, places and the ocean with the immediacy, grace and clarity of a kayak cutting through sea spray.'

David Gange, historian and author of *The Frayed Atlantic Edge*

'An incredible read of adventure and life that will draw you in and inspire you to pursue your own journeys. Katie has truly honoured her brother with this gripping recount.'

Jenny Tough, adventurer and author of *Tough Women Adventure Stories* and *Solo*

'*Moderate Becoming Good Later* is a wonderfully salty adventure, a quixotic odyssey driven by equal parts grit and good humour around the stormy shores of western Europe. But what really elevates this above other travellers' tales is the astonishing and moving story of the book's completion – a remarkable collaboration across the ultimate gulf.'

Tim Hannigan, travel, nature and history writer

'What a brave and tenderly written account of one man's fortitude in coming to terms with a shortened life using visits by kayak to the familiar Shipping Forecast sea areas as "stepping stones" on his final journey.'

Peter Jefferson, broadcaster and author of *And Now The Shipping Forecast*

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Sea Kayaking the Shipping Forecast

summersdale

To those who didn't choose to have their adventures curtailed, may you find solace and delight in what you can do, in the time you have.

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FOREWORD

It's still dark as I write this early in the morning on a little peninsula in area Malin, looking across a sea loch to the opposite shore where a string of tiny lights bisects the blackness of water and sky.

Above the string of lights is the invisible magic of the heavens. Somewhere up there are patches of high and low pressure with currents of air moving between them at constantly changing velocities. Francis Beaufort devised a scale to grade those velocities, and while we can at least have a decent stab at predicting their speeds and directions in the short term, those movements in the skies will always remain way beyond our control.

The darkness below the string of lights is of a different order. The sea, beholden to the moon, is constantly on the move, from the infinite shifting shards on the surface to the relentless peaking and troughing of the tides. An unspoken cooperation with those invisible movements in the skies makes the sea tricky to predict; with storms and squalls come surges and swells, turning the sea into something John Ruskin described as 'bounding and crashing and coiling in an anarchy of enormous power'.

We will never tame the sea any more than we will tame the weather; knowledge you would think might foster a little humility in us humans, but no, we still swank around like we own the place, hemmed in by a sea that couldn't give a toss whether we're there or not because it's the sea that actually owns the place.

The best we can do if we can't tame the sea is at least try to predict what it might get up to in cahoots with the weather. The best we can do with those predictions is try to ensure that people out on the roiling, unpredictable sea are as safe as possible.

The best we can do to achieve that is the Shipping Forecast.

Seamus Heaney called it a 'sibilant penumbra', while for Carol Ann Duffy it's 'the radio's prayer'. We can take poets' word for it because the litany of the Shipping Forecast is a form of poetry, a national epic even, recited four times every day, always different yet always the same, reassuring in its regularity, comforting in its progress around the map through familiar places – Dover, Hebrides, Wight – and locations that defy conventional mapping – Dogger, Sole, Bailey.

Yet for all its recondite meteorological phrasing and the reassuring rhythms of its recitation we must never lose sight of how the Shipping Forecast is there to save lives. Arguably it's the greatest piece of public altruism ever devised; for a century the Shipping Forecast has been broadcast for the benefit of whoever needs it, wherever they might be. There is no profit to be made from the Shipping Forecast, no bottom line to please the bean counters. There is no hierarchy of usage because everyone is equal under the Shipping Forecast, from the salty old seadog in his brine-encrusted fishing boat to the oligarch on his superyacht. The Shipping Forecast represents the best of us.

Estimating how many lives have been saved by the Shipping Forecast is an impossible task, but the reassurance provided by its rhythmic incantation goes much further than practical application for seafarers. Hearing the broadcast wakens something inside us, this poetry of protection an evocative

reminder that not everything about being an island nation is insular or inward-looking. In fact, the Shipping Forecast is about as outward-looking as it gets, always facing the horizon, the shore at its back, watching over those at sea, binding us to our continent through relentless compassion and the invisible briny grid of a map that reaches from Iceland to Germany, Portugal to Norway.

The beauty of its composition and delivery is what elevates the forecast in our national consciousness to something way beyond a short-term prediction of the weather. Long-embedded in the culture of the nation, the Shipping Forecast has inspired poets, artists, photographers, musicians and writers. How is it that something composed to a strict template using a specific vocabulary with absolutely no scope for nuance can inspire such a rich range of artistic exploration?

The mystery retained in that composition must have something to do with it. From the names of the areas to phrases like 'low Trafalgar 1009 moving steadily south-east, losing its identity', the Shipping Forecast can, for landlubbers at least, be as enigmatic as it is addictive.

Longevity must count for a lot – broadcast in something approaching its present form for a century, a string of generations has grown up listening to the Shipping Forecast – while living on this rain-lashed archipelago probably contributes to the forecast's elevated significance. France and Spain also have long-established Shipping Forecasts, for example, which don't enjoy the same heightened cultural affection as ours.

Perhaps ultimately it comes down to its inherent goodness, the concern for fellow humans that thrums beneath the four daily broadcast incantations. The calm compassion inherent in

the forecast unites people in a world growing ever angrier and more divided.

Either way, the Shipping Forecast supports a surprisingly large and varied community of enthusiasts. A few years ago I made a similar journey to the one on which Toby Carr sets out in this book, visiting – or at least passing through – each of the 31 Shipping Forecast areas. It's almost 20 years now since the book I wrote about my journey was published but to this day I still receive messages and tweets from people excited to know they are not the only ones captivated by the mystery of the broadcast's curious prosody, keen to share their stories about this quirky meteorological enigma.

One day, one of those messages came from Toby Carr.

'I'm writing regarding a slightly mad project I am about to embark on, which I think you could be interested in,' he wrote, leading to our first meeting on a stormy night in a dingy old seafarers' pub a pebble's toss from the English Channel. Overlooked by framed posters commemorating Victorian wreck sales and damp-crinkled old prints of sailing ships, I listened over a couple of pints to Toby's plans for the voyages contained in these pages, his eyes flashing with excitement in the candlelight for what lay ahead. I could sense even then his gentle kindness, not to mention a fierce intelligence worn lightly and a steely determination concealed behind immense personal warmth.

Toby's journey was much more ambitious than the one on which I had embarked, which essentially involved turning up in a place, squinting at a distant lighthouse, wandering through a museum with my hands behind my back trying to look clever, tripping over a mooring line and decamping to a pub because it was raining (it was always raining). Toby went

further by actually taking to the water, some of which was, as you'll discover, pretty lively.

No vessel brings you closer to the water than a kayak, but nobody was more at home occupying that shimmering meniscus between water and air than Toby. Even the last time I heard from him, an email sent just a week before he died, he described his delight at being back in the kayak after a long absence for medical treatment.

'I was so pleased to get on the water yesterday,' he wrote, 'and even just floating around with the sun on my face has done me the world of good.'

Having only met Toby in the last years of his life I dearly wish there had been more time. Thank goodness for this remarkable record of a remarkable adventure, in which his personality shines through along with his zest for life, uncanny knack for unearthing stories and adventure and his delight in seeing new places, new horizons and meeting new people. For those of us fortunate enough to have known him, even a little, this book is a wonderful testament that will sustain his legacy. For those who didn't know Toby personally, well, you're the lucky ones, about to meet a unique human with an incredible story.

That Toby's voice remains with us in these pages is down to the extraordinary work of his sister Katie, who somehow managed to assemble his scattered notebooks, blog posts, video and sound recordings and the few chapters he had managed to complete, then turn them into the wonderful book you're holding in your hands. Writing a book is difficult enough at the best of times; to do so in the circumstances Katie endured is a truly remarkable achievement.

The orange smudge of dawn is now beginning to pick out the silhouette of the hills above that string of lights across the water. The early Shipping Forecast has already described the day ahead as 'south or south-east three to five, becoming variable three or less later. Fair. Good.'

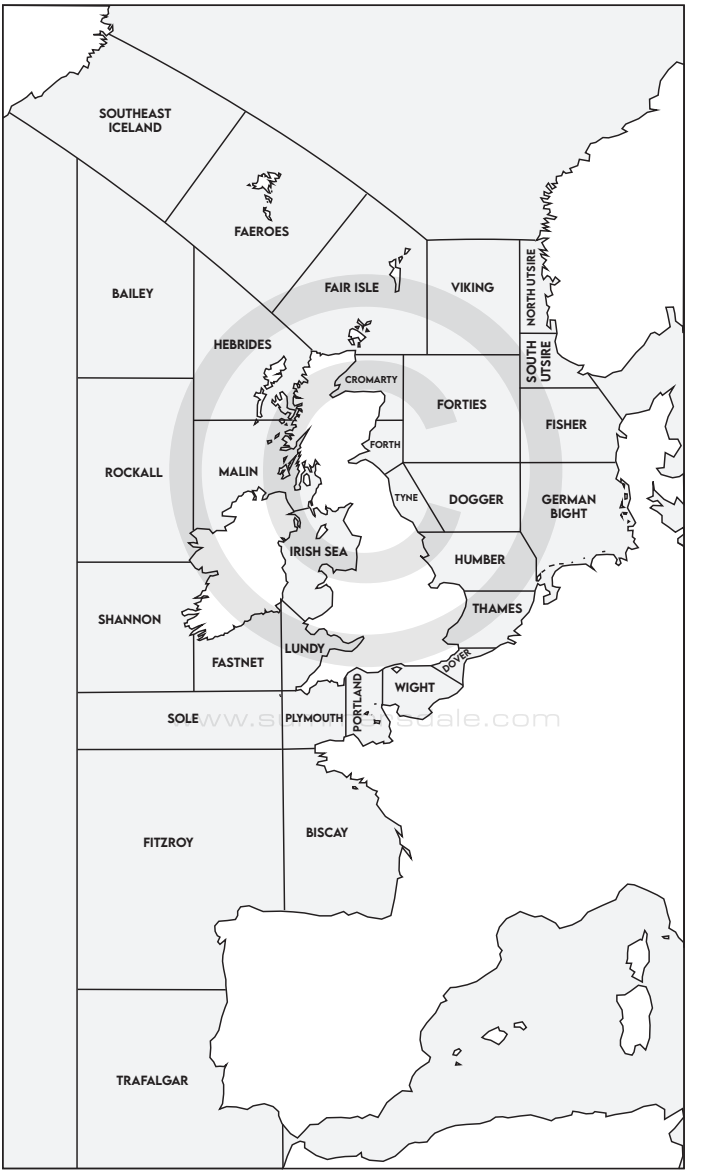
Fair. Good. Two words to which we can all aspire.

Fair. Good. Ideal kayaking conditions.

Fair. Good. Safe travels, Toby.

Charlie Connelly
Argyll, Scotland
February 2023

Please note the maps included in this book are for information purposes and should not be used for navigation.



Part 1

SQUALLY SHOWERS

THE CHALLENGE

Rosemary oil infuses the air as the early summer light begins to flood through the slightly open window, as if there is hope for another day. My brother-in-law Andy and I have spent the night in St Joseph's Hospice in Hackney, where my brother Marcus is slowly and painfully dying of throat cancer, his body wasting away, until on this mid-May morning, he takes his last breath. It's not dramatic; it's a fading, a sun finally slipping below the horizon on a grey day. He was 38.

We sit in a thick silence for a long time. We've been talking to him all night, Andy sharing memories of the places they visited together: New Zealand, Denmark, Spain, South Korea – we travelled the world that night. If he had heard us, Marcus might have been glad of the peace. When we leave him for the last time, I feel nothing. Andy goes to Sainsbury's to get some breakfast things and I float around Victoria Park, where the lightness of the trees in bloom is meaningless, almost mocking the enormity of what has just happened. Everything and nothing has changed.

Marcus and I shared a little-known genetic illness, Fanconi anaemia which affects around one in two million people and

has improving but relatively poor survival rates. At seven, I was told I would be lucky to reach 30. Since reaching this milestone five years ago, I sometimes get the feeling I'm living on borrowed time.

'And now the Shipping Forecast, issued by the Met Office at 00.15 hours on Thursday 11th May 2017…'

The night of the day Marcus dies I listen to the late Shipping Forecast at 00.48, one of the four-a-day broadcasts on BBC Radio 4 of the maritime weather forecast for the waters around the British Isles. The words I have heard my whole life comfort the emptiness I feel, giving gravity to the enormity of losing my brother. Like many others, I often listen to the Shipping Forecast to drift off to sleep at night, its repetitive rhythm a reassuring and reliable constant for me. Whatever is going on, the bigger forces of nature are still active, and while the names of distant places drift in and out of my comprehension, somewhere out there, someone will be on the water.

We weren't a particularly boat-oriented family, but for around seven years when I was a child we had a small boat called *Hullaballoo* which we sailed out of the river Orwell on the east coast and were definitely what someone described to me recently as 'a bit salty'. We spent most weekends and holidays there, come rain or shine. Marcus, my sister Katie and I often joked on particularly dismal, grey and windy days that it would be a good day to go on the boat. Typical

jobs would involve scraping the barnacles off the bottom, reapplying the antifouling, pumping out the bilge tanks and writing down the Shipping Forecast for Humber, Thames and Dover. We explored the rivers Deben, Alde, Orwell, Stour and the Walton Backwaters. My dad Mike (who, like our mum Bron, we always called by his first name) was never happier than when on the water. Even when we were on land with no prospects of sailing in the next few weeks, he would turn up the radio when the Shipping Forecast came on. For Mike the forecast also became a way to soothe the pain of losing Bron, to a debilitating viral brain injury which she never recovered from.

One sunny July morning in Barrowden, where I grew up riding bikes around the village green and climbing trees, Bron woke up confused, unable to remember her name or recognise who any of us were. It was 1988 and I was six. She was rushed to hospital and we were thrown into a world of uncertainty: a life with a mother who was physically there but emotionally and mentally incapacitated. Long-term mental healthcare in Britain in the late eighties left a lot to be desired and Bron came home after five months in hospital. Home life for all of us was a challenge. Despite improved support and care over the years, Bron's rehabilitation never happened, and she would not recognise me in the street if she saw me today, even though I visit as regularly as I can.

Mike was insistent that we should keep sailing our 'floating caravan' of a boat. The time spent close to the water had a big impact on me, Marcus and Katie. It gave us a sense of the possibilities and freedom of the sea, a place to escape as well as a taste of adventure and discovery. I distinctly remember the feeling of driving from the coast in the back of the car after a

weekend outdoors, sunburnt, with dried saltwater encrusted on my face and the smell of toxic paints and muddy wellies in the boot. Feeling tired and exhausted but content.

I never really got into sailing and after Mike sold the boat, aside from regular holidays to visit grandparents in Eastbourne, I didn't have much to do with the sea. This wasn't a choice but something imposed by my condition. Fanconi Hope, the excellent charity supporting those affected by Fanconi anaemia, defines the disease as 'a rare, life-limiting genetic disorder causing bone marrow failure in children and a predisposition to gynaecological, head and neck cancers, together with other complications both in childhood and in later life.' If there is such a thing as a typical Fanconi patient, I am one.

At the age of 12, I became seriously ill and my body stopped responding to the steroids that had been propping up my failing bone marrow. Dependent on blood transfusions for several years, I was part of an experimental gene therapy programme in the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. While visiting New York, Washington, D.C. and New Orleans was exciting, the treatment didn't seem to help. The only option was a transplant. Back in the UK, my condition worsened into leukemia and the prospects were dire. Neither Katie nor Marcus were matches and several searches of the register drew a blank. Things were not looking good as I developed antibodies to most blood products and was living in isolation. A referral to the international register highlighted a partial match with a donor from Germany and although risky, we went for it. At fifteen, I had a successful bone marrow transplant with various complications which left me with a severely weakened immune system, but alive and eternally grateful for the kindness of a stranger who saved my life.

The treatment, transplant and recovery meant that for long periods of time I was kept in isolation and for several months couldn't go outdoors at all. I read books about long journeys and followed them in my imagination. At night, with one of the other inpatients – Tom, a wise-eyed 15-year-old with a penchant for breaking the rules – we used to explore the hospital stairways, silent corridors and hidden departments. There was a covered tunnel where staff took a cigarette break; we used to call it 'Smokey Mountain' as there were always grey clouds hanging in the air. It was cold and uninsulated but had a view of the sky in contrast to the heat and bright lights of the wards. Further on, an underground subway painted with a beach scene linked the two sides of the building. The flooring changed as you walked down the ramp; it went from a hollow-sounding timber to solid concrete, from yellow to blue, which was the line of the seawater in the mural. We were gradually immersed into an underwater world, coming up on the other side for the canteen and X-ray department. It was a simple artwork but it took me to another place every time I went through it.

For years afterwards as I went through my GCSEs, A-levels, degree and professional architect training, I was advised that I shouldn't spend time outdoors. I felt disconnected – this cotton-wool self-care expected of me was limiting my enjoyment of the life that so many had helped me to hold on to. I got into cycling, both around my home city of London and on longer trips in Europe, but it wasn't until after Mike's unexpected death from a heart attack in autumn of 2010 that I reconnected with the sea.

For as long as I can remember, my aunt and uncle Nicky and Kevin have been adventuring by land and sea. It wasn't

unusual for us to spend an evening after a family meal lying on the green carpeted floor in my grandparent's lounge looking at the latest pictures from their journey to Spitsbergen or Greenland. After Mike died, they invited Katie and I for Christmas at their home in Jersey. Straight off the plane and we were in wetsuits jumping off the pier into the bay. A few days of surfing, kayaking and swimming around this beautiful island was all I needed to reignite a connection to the ocean, the refreshing sense of freedom and possibility of the water.

That same Christmas, I found a worrying lump in my throat and soon after I was diagnosed with cancer. I underwent several operations to remove tumours in my mouth and throat, which didn't stop me from joining Tower Hamlets Canoe Club and starting what would become a life-changing connection with these small one-person boats. Kevin has described kayaking as 'aqua rambling', and one of the great things about the sport is that it's easy to start and get better at, even if you're recovering from cancer.

From the moment I got in a boat, I loved the simplicity of it: the kayak, the paddle and the water. I loved the connection I felt to the wide variety of people at the club who showed me kindness and patience as I built confidence and strength in things I thought I wouldn't be able to do. I loved the way it sucked me out of London and on to wild coasts around the UK at the weekends and on holidays. Joining Tower Hamlets Canoe Club took me from often feeling alone in the grey of the city to being connected to nature and others.

In the years leading up to Marcus's death in 2017, I spent most of my spare time in a kayak. I balanced British Canoeing training and assessments with as much experience as I could get. At first, me and other newbies were taken out by more

experienced kayakers – I remember feeling my heart race as the wind picked up and the sea got choppier. Later I found myself with kayakers of a similar level where we struggled to apply our navigation and meteorology knowledge to the state of the sea, and later still I led groups as an Advanced Water Sea Kayak Leader and Coach. Kayaking is a much more cerebral activity than you might expect, so while you need to know all the rescue moves should you get into trouble, most of the training and practice is about understanding what's going on in the atmosphere, water and land: a change in one of them can change everything.

In the five years between the Christmas in Jersey and Marcus's death, I led groups on much of the south-east and south-west coasts of England as well as in parts of Wales, and organised expeditions in the Scilly Isles and Outer Hebrides. My personal paddling took me even further afield to Arctic Greenland, the French Alps and Sardinia as well as training in the Channel Islands, Cornwall, Anglesey and Pembrokeshire. I'd already kayaked in 13 of the Shipping Forecast areas. Despite the physical part of kayaking often being considered akin to a hearty walk, you need a lot of training and experience to kayak alone in the wilderness where the sea meets the land.

The numbness that engulfs me in the wake of Marcus's death in 2017 subsides as the summer sets in and gives way to an overwhelming desire to change my life in as many ways possible. I've been angling for a solo adventure since

cycling the Trollstigen mountain path in Norway the year before, camping in the lush undergrowth along the way, but something was holding me back. I'm far from the best kayaker in club, yet people with less skill have been on big adventures. Over the course of a few years, and many trips, I've developed the kind of reliance on the deep friendships only attainable when you spend a lot of time problem-solving together: it is easier and more fun to do things with others, even if it's less of a challenge. Marcus's death changed that and as I drift through the rest of that year, I realise now is the time for a proper solo adventure. But what?

The devastating outcome of the Brexit referendum has placed the division of the UK from the rest of Europe on the horizon, and it is starting to feel like sauntering around Europe in a kayak might not be as easy in the future as it is today. In this time of disconnection, it feels more important to connect. It dawns on me that the Shipping Forecast is one of the ways our island is connected to our neighbours, its 31 sea areas bridging the water between the British Isles and mainland Europe: from Southeast Iceland in the north-west, down the entire coast of Western Europe to Trafalgar including the tip of Portugal and a tiny point off Morocco in the south: shared seas, shared stories. In each of the four daily broadcasts, the Shipping Forecast is recited in the same format and order, giving mariners information on gale warnings in force, a general synopsis, and forecasts for each of the 31 sea areas, containing wind direction and force, weather, and visibility. Broadcasters achieve this in three minutes, the lyrical place names, repetition and rhythm making it sound more like a poem than an informational broadcast. Few people use the broadcast as a way to understand the weather, but any

attempts to curtail its airtime have been met with uproar by the British public. The names of the sea areas are so familiar to me, I often wonder what places like Faroes, South Utsire, Biscay and FitzRoy are like, and by the time the Shipping Forecast hits the headlines in August 2017 for celebrating its 150th birthday, I've decided it's time to find out.

I had heard about the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust (or the Churchill Fellowship as it later became), who fund international trips of all types under the slogan, 'Travel to Learn, Return to Inspire'. It's a wonderful institution which has been on my radar for a while. In fact, I've had their list of Fellowship application questions open in my phone notes for three years. It's these questions, no doubt honed to perfection over the 50-plus years the Fellowship has been in operation, that now force me to define what would otherwise be a vague excuse to go kayaking.

It's mid-September, the leaves outside my tiny London flat are crispy, just about to turn, and the sky threatens to add more wetness to my afternoon where I'll be kayaking with my friend Owen at the Lee Valley White Water Centre. For now though, I have coffee and I'm determined to fill in the form. I start with the easy bit: name, address, employment history, additional information… then project details. Right, now we're getting to it. I'm momentarily distracted by the movement in the trees, a police siren, and the thought that I should warm up my coffee. 'No,' I say to myself, with the restraint gained from years of detailed desk work as an architect, 'stick with it'.

'Project description.' It doesn't look like there's much space so I put, 'Moderate Becoming Good Later: sea kayaking the Shipping Forecast.' The name has taken a few iterations but

I'm happy with it. A phrase from the Shipping Forecast, it refers to visibility on the sea, but I like the sense of hope it conveys. A kind of learned optimism that has got me to where I am despite my setbacks. It could also refer to my level of kayaking.

I say none of this on the form and move to the next part: 'Countries?' The Shipping Forecast covers nine European countries as well as the four in the British Isles, but the form is looking for specifics and because Churchill's 'living legacy' is all about learning from abroad and bringing that knowledge back, the destinations have to be outside of the UK. I look at the Shipping Forecast map and pick Iceland at the very top, Portugal at the very bottom, Spain and the Faroe Islands because they sound interesting. I feel a well of excitement as I write these down. I have no idea what a trip including these places would look like but I can figure that out later. Next, 'Number of weeks.' My guess is I'd need at least two for each so I write eight. That's probably the maximum time I can get off work as well.

Outside, the grey sky is excreting a fine drizzle that my houseplants would enjoy. 'State the background to your proposed project,' says the form. 'Oof', I think, time to make another coffee while I deal with that. I've never liked talking about my illness, or Marcus's or Bron's, I find the glimmer of pity in listeners' eyes paralyzing, as if it were a confirmation that I shouldn't be out doing what I'm doing. But I know I need to include some context. So after a pot of coffee, my fifth draft is as short and to the point as an explanation of my backstory can be. I start: *'Diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder as a child…'*

I think of the reaction most people would have to it: 'Oh that's terrible!' 'It must have been so hard!', 'I'm really sorry!'

– and there it is, the pity. I don't want pity, I want to look forward, because to look back is to submerge myself in the boggy ground of grief and hopelessness. On the water you have to read the signs in the moment and look forward, predicting what might happen, so that you're ready to react when something else does. I like this as an approach to life as well. I copy the draft from the Word document into the form and move on.

'Describe the aim(s) of your project and what additional knowledge or understanding your Fellowship project will contribute to what is already happening in this field in the UK.' I've been thinking a lot about this and I know it's something I will refine as I go on. For now, the project is about how active engagement with outdoor environments and physical challenges can help to overcome personal adversity and how a curious approach to these can deepen the experience. 'Is that enough?' I wonder. The Churchill Fellowship has a huge scope and while it supports adventures and discovery, many Fellows focus on the challenges facing society today. I am inspired by UK explorers like Sarah Outen and Justine Curgenven, whose expeditions, documentaries, books and talks help others, including me, to broaden horizons.

I can't believe how useful these questions are in shaping my thoughts, and I seem to be on a roll, so as the drizzle turns to proper London rain, I text Owen, a good friend of mine even before he was a kayaker, to let him know I might be a bit late getting to Lee Valley. Back to the application form. Only three questions to go.

'Describe how you will carry out your project.' I wonder how much detail they want. Planning a trip generally requires a big investment of time, good navigational skills, local

knowledge and a large helping of logistical problem-solving. I get momentarily sidetracked thinking about how one might get a kayak to Iceland, before realising that's not what I'm being asked.

Sometimes with a challenge it's easier to ask, 'how will you know when you've completed it?' I realise that my eventual ambition with the project is to have kayaked in part of all 31 areas of the Shipping Forecast. The sheer size of the land masses involved means that the aim is not to kayak the entire length of the coasts but to select the most interesting parts and link them together by land or sea. This will be a solo project but I hope to contact local paddlers and communities to build my trip and have some company on the water. The foreign part of the expedition would take me to the outer reaches of the map to explore the northern extremities of the forecast (Southeast Iceland and Faroes) and the southernmost points (Trafalgar, FitzRoy, Biscay). By visiting and engaging with the extremes in a sea kayak, I hope to learn both how the environmental conditions change and lead to different human responses.

Penultimate question. The rain has stopped and a grey orb looms in the sky, looking like it might break through the clouds. 'Please tell us your thoughts and plans for sharing or implementing your findings.' I'm ready for this one: I've already reserved a domain for my blog, thought about school visits and planned to use social media to provide live updates and reflections on the places visited. I imagine compiling videos, interviews, sound recordings and photographic footage of the trip into a series of contrasting perspectives of people and places. I put all this down, thinking about how much I would enjoy this part as well.

Final question – I'm going to have to skip lunch but we'll have time for a good session. 'Please describe the benefits, or impacts, of your project for others as well as yourself.' I haven't really thought about this before, but my morning's work pays off and I quickly compile a list. I save the document, grab my stuff, and text Owen as I walk out of the building. After a morning inside, I'm keen to get on the water. A few days and revisions later, on the first birthday on which I don't receive a card from Marcus, I send the application.

By the end of October I receive an email telling me I've been shortlisted out of 1,096 candidates and am one of the final 266 being interviewed for the 150 grants on offer this year. The interview will be in early January but before that I'm asked to fill in a more detailed form about my trip. This time they are expecting me to plan it day by day and come up with a detailed budget for the journey: things I know I need to do anyway but have been avoiding. I spend a few weeks of winter's evenings in front of my laptop taking notes on scraps of paper in red fine liner – it's a pleasant way to hibernate. The first thing I realise is that I need to redefine which countries I will visit, as if I'm going to complete all the Shipping Forecast areas outside of the UK, there will be more than I put on the form. I like the idea of starting in Southeast Iceland, which is always the last area to be mentioned on the Shipping Forecast, so I work my way down from there.

I've often been asked how I plan my trips and I don't think there's much mystery to it. I start by finding out what might be interesting in the area I'm focusing on. This could be national parks, remote islands, caves, recommended places to kayak, even museums or cities. The information comes from Google, guidebooks and, most effectively, from people who know the

area. Then I look at the logistics. How can my kayak and I get to these places and onwards? Airports and ferry terminals often dictate what is and isn't possible. As I structure the trip, I note down the routes and costs of travel, the number of kilometres to be kayaked and the best times of the year to visit. Everything is weather-dependent so there needs to be some flexibility.

Later of course, I will plot navigation routes on nautical charts, carefully looking at the weather, tides, landing spots and places to camp, but for now, it's the basic structure I'm asked for. I start a list of contacts in each place, determined that this trip will be about connection and learning from others, not isolating myself in a small boat. As I think through Southeast Iceland, Faroes, North Utsire, South Utsire, Fisher, German Bight, Biscay, FitzRoy, and Trafalgar, I feel butterflies in my stomach, excited about what might be possible. By the time I send the form, the sea areas are already more than their lyrical names, I now know how to get to them, the names of places in them, and everything seems more real. The end of the terrible year where I lost my brother is suddenly twinkling with the possibility of opportunity in the next.

No matter how positive you feel, illness can still step in and quash those dreams. On New Year's Day I wake up in the Wye Valley where I've been kayaking with some friends, but halfway home, at Leigh Delamere Services on the M4, I am scraped up by an ambulance crew, completely incapacitated, vomiting, sensitive to

light, unable to move my head and in severe amounts of pain, despite having been off the booze for the last week. Quick-thinking paramedics administer IV antibiotics and antiviral treatment on the way to the closest A&E, in Swindon, for suspected meningitis – an action which on reflection probably saved my life and ensured there was no lasting damage.

The next day is hazy as I'm given high-strength painkillers, hallucinogenic anti-sickness treatment and a lumbar puncture. I begin to feel brighter as the antibiotics start their fight. Katie arrives having jumped on a flight from Spain, where she has lived for the last sixteen years, about as excited as the rest of us to spend time in Swindon. By the afternoon I can finally look at my phone again. Although I'm hardly able to sit up in bed, I draft a careful email to cancel my interview with the Churchill Fellowship, scheduled for two days later in London. A reply comes quickly, 'Unfortunately, as you cannot attend the interview we will have to allocate your designated time slot to an applicant on the reserve list.' My heart drops. Most of the time I manage to stay out of the destructive spiral of how my illness limits my opportunities, but today I dive into it. Of all the times I could have become ill, it had to be now, just before my interview for an opportunity I have spent every free moment thinking about and have pinned more hopes on than I'd care to admit.

I feel devastated, but within twenty minutes I manage to pull myself together enough to draft one last-shot email. 'At the core of my application is encouraging others to overcome the barrier created by poor health,' I state, 'so I'm very keen to find a way that this could work…' I go on to suggest that I could attempt to get a doctor to sign off on a day release, but this seems unlikely within the timeframe, as Katie is still having

to wear full PPE when visiting and I'm not allowed to leave my room due to infection control (meningitis is sometimes infectious and always treated as such). The reply comes in less than five minutes: 'We'd rather you rest and recover fully and we will do all we can on our end to find a suitable slot to fit you in.' A better outcome, but by no means a certainty.

That evening my diagnosis is confirmed as the non-contagious pneumococcal strain of bacterial meningitis meaning that at least I haven't put the lives of friends and family at risk. Two days later, I'm offered a new slot for my interview in London later in the month, and I feel lucky to still have the possibility. My aunt Nicky arrives, bringing with her a copy of Charlie Connelly's book, *Attention All Shipping* – a witty account of his experiences in the areas of the Shipping Forecast. I spend every moment I can lapping up his tales about each area, keen to get to each by sea and find my own stories.

Eventually, discharged and back in London, I am placed in the care of The Homerton, a local community hospital, who carefully monitor my blood counts and manage my release back into the wild. I'm just well enough to attend the interview in person, the canula in my hand giving me more credibility than my smart jacket and new haircut. I didn't expect it to be emotional, but as the interviewers delve into the details behind my application, I find myself, uncharacteristically, holding back the tears. This isn't the intention behind their questioning, but is the result of a hard start to the year and a feeling that I'd escaped death yet again. As I leave, I'm even more determined to start my journey around the Shipping Forecast.

A few days past Valentine's Day, a large envelope slumps through my letterbox, marked with the logo of the Winston

Churchill Memorial Trust. I'm excited as I rip it open to find an acceptance letter and welcome pack. At first, I can't believe it and read the letter through several times to check that they have actually offered it to me. Once I'm sure of this, my eyes mist up. I'm delighted and daunted that such a prestigious institution believes in my project. I realise that this hasn't just been about the grant I've been awarded (although this of course helps) but more the confirmation that what I've set out to do isn't a crazy idea. I almost skip my way through the park to the wine shop to see if I can find a bottle of Pol Roger, Churchill's favourite champagne. Raising a glass with friends later, I feel a mixture of trepidation and excitement: there's no going back now!