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The Winds *from* Further West

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This book is for Alistair Moffat, who has brought the delights of Scottish history to so many.

Part One

One

Almost everything starts in a small way. There is no shortage of examples – and attendant metaphors: rivers begin with a trickle of water in a remote upland; oaks emerge from nothing bigger than an acorn; a cloud the size of a hand becomes a full-blown storm. Often it is an apparently insignificant event that ends up dictating the whole shape of our lives: a random, even whimsical, decision; an unanticipated remark; a chance encounter – any of these may have consequences far beyond the immediate.

For Neil, just such a moment occurred when he walked into a Turkish barbershop in Glasgow. He had made an appointment, but he was early, and he had to wait. Had he been on time, his life would probably have been quite different. As it was, he sat down on one of the cracked-leather-covered seats and picked up a copy of *New Scientist* left by a previous customer among the usual detritus of the barbershop: the men's grooming monthlies, the well-thumbed copies of car magazines, the out-of-date newspapers. *New Scientist* was a cut above all that; it reported on scientific advances: new non-stick saucepans, gene editing, insights into the earth's crust. It

also carried advertisements for scientific jobs, and it was one of these that caught his eye. An Edinburgh research institute had a vacancy for a medically qualified researcher. That was what Neil was, and he was coming to the end of his public-health contract in Glasgow. He was thirty-five, and ready for a change. The timing could not have been better, and Neil was appointed after an interview that proved surprisingly cursory. He was, in fact, the only candidate, although they kept that from him, out of consideration for his feelings.

Although independent of the major local university, and not part of any other Scottish university, the institute ran courses for undergraduate students, participated in doctoral programmes and undertook research for government bodies. Its staff were experts in both animal and human health; they tracked the progress of diseases at home and abroad, recording their waxing and waning with the seasons and the movement of animals and of people. They responded to the occasional scare, as swine or avian flu wove their way in and out of the newspaper headlines. They watched, at a distance, outbreaks of cholera in distant shanty towns. They waited for what many of them thought to be inevitable: Ebola and Marburg fever were waiting in the wings. It was potentially apocalyptic work.

"Will microbes get us eventually?" a friend asked him. "That's what you do, isn't it? That's the question that you're paid to answer."

Neil smiled. "They've been trying hard enough," he replied. "And yes, they probably will – sooner or later. But they won't necessarily get all of us. That happened with the Neanderthals, I think, but we might dodge that bullet."

His friend was curious, and Neil explained further. "Neanderthals probably died out because they had no

resistance to the diseases that Homo sapiens brought when we met them."

"Rather like the Aztecs?"

"Yes. They had no resistance to Old World viruses. It was an unequal battle. Neanderthals may have had the same experience."

"So they didn't die because they couldn't compete with us – and our clever ways?"

Neanderthals were not stupid, Neil pointed out. They used tools and had fire. They even appeared to engage in artistic activity. Their bad press, which portrayed them as brutes, was almost certainly wide of the mark.

Such speculation – historical epidemiology – was, he said, the intellectually challenging part of the subject. For the most part, as he was at pains to point out, his job was much more mundane: gathering statistics, preparing tables, tracking the progress of winter flu as it spread across the globe, following the paths it had always followed – those of humanity on the move. "If only we would stay put for a while," Neil observed, "we'd run into fewer hostile organisms. But we won't. Humanity won't change. Humanity *can't* change."

That was a rare defeatist moment. For the most part, he saw no point in dwelling upon the bleak aspects of his work. He, and people like him, might do little to change the basic rules of engagement between human beings and microbes, but here and there, in small corners of the battlefield, they achieved their largely unsung victories. And in the background, their research, sometimes painfully slow and seemingly entirely theoretical, built up the human armoury against microbial defeat.

*

Neil had barely been in his new post in Edinburgh for three months when he met Chrissie Thomson. She was a junior colleague at the institute, a microbiologist with a special interest in respiratory infections. She was on a postdoctoral research fellowship that had another year to run before further funding would need to be found. That did not worry her: Chrissie, it became clear, had money, having inherited from a childless relative an expensive flat in London. Having no desire to live in it, she had sold this for a figure that Neil found difficult to believe.

"How can anyone afford to pay that?" he had asked. "And who would want to anyway? Think what you could do with that sort of money."

"You could live in London," Chrissie said, smiling. "That's what those places cost."

"But . . . three bedrooms . . . That's more than a million per bedroom."

"It's the area," said Chrissie. "Mayfair, no less."

He shook his head. "What are you doing having relatives who live in Mayfair? Nobody *real* lives there any longer."

"She was very old. She'd lived there for decades – before it became out of reach for anybody who actually paid taxes in this country."

"I suppose so." He paused. "Do you think it's honest money they paid? The people who bought it from you, I mean."

Chrissie said she had not met them. "They live in Monte Carlo."

"Then it's not."

"Possibly. But we had no way of telling and you shouldn't refuse to sell a flat to somebody just because they live in a place like that."

"Like Monte Carlo?"

"Yes. I wouldn't live there – and I suspect you wouldn't either. But presumably there are *some* people who aren't there for tax avoidance reasons."

Neil looked doubtful. "I don't know. You may be right."

"Anyway, I don't think they're going to spend much time in London. My solicitor said that they were far too busy."

He looked away. "What are you going to do with all that money?"

"Nothing at the moment. When my postdoc runs out, I suppose I'll live on it – until I get something else. It removes the urgency from my life."

"You're very lucky." He paused. "But you still want to work?"

She gave him a sideways look. "Of course I do."

He sensed that he was being reproached. "I was just wondering how ambitious you were."

Chrissie frowned. "I'm as ambitious as . . . anybody else."

He pointed out that in academic circles that could amount to ruthlessness. "They'd murder for a chair," he said. "An American poet. It was one of those lines that stuck, for some reason."

She looked at him with interest. "I didn't know you liked poetry."

"I do. Some of it lodges in the mind, and comes back at odd times. People say that the thing about poetry is its power to haunt."

She looked thoughtful. "I'm just a simple scientist. Perhaps you're too clever for me."

He denied that he was clever. "I'm nothing special. An ordinary doctor."

"You shouldn't be too modest," she said. "You have a post in

a prestigious institute. You can do research. There are plenty of people who would like to be where you are."

"As Robert Lowell pointed out . . ." He paused. "But you wouldn't do anything to get where you want to get, would you?"

She smiled. "I wouldn't murder for a chair, if that's what you're asking."

"Of course you wouldn't."

She became serious. "People don't expect women to be as ambitious as men, do they? And yet why shouldn't we want the things that men have?"

He said that he saw no reason why it should be any different for women. "Lady Macbeth was the ruthless one – Macbeth himself was the wimp."

Now she changed the subject. "I admit that having a bit of money gives me freedom. That's something, I suppose."

"It is. For most people, that would be just about everything."

She did not respond to this, but she looked at him. "Do you care about money? Does it mean much to you?"

He wondered whether there was a barb in her question. Did she think that he might be interested in her for her money?

He shook his head. "Not particularly," he said. "Money's useful if there's something you want to do that you wouldn't otherwise be able to afford. Sure, it must be nice to have it then. But otherwise . . ." He shrugged. "I'm fairly indifferent to it."

She looked pleased. "I was hoping you'd say that."

"As long as I have enough of it," he added.

*

A month or so after their first date – dinner at a seafood restaurant in Leith – Chrissie announced that she had been looking at a flat on the south side of the city. "It has views," she said. "And acres of space. We could each have two rooms."

He was surprised. "Are you asking me to live with you?"

She blushed. "I suppose I was. I have a habit of thinking out loud. Perhaps I was just thinking of what a good idea it would be."

He smiled at her. "Why not? We all have to live somewhere."

His response helped her to overcome her embarrassment. "That's a very romantic way of putting it."

He was quick to apologise. "I'm sorry. Of course I'd like to live with you – who wouldn't?"

"Oh, I suspect a lot of people wouldn't. I'm a bit untidy."

He said that he wouldn't mind. He was untidy too.

"And I take hours in the shower," she continued. "Hours."

"I very rarely shower." He laughed.

She looked at him with mock reproach. "And you a doctor too . . . with all you know about germs. Perhaps I should reconsider my invitation."

"Please don't."

"All right. Let's move in together. As long as you shower regularly."

He gave her his hand to shake. Then he kissed her.

She said, "We're going to be so happy. I can feel it."

"So can I."

He thought: I'm saying that without thinking. He was not completely sure that he would be happy living with her, but, at the same time, he had no reason to think that he would be unhappy. That did not mean that he was indifferent to her: what he felt was fondness – and it was a growing fondness

at that. It could mature into a deeper love, but until it did that, it was what one might call a satisfactory relationship. That was the lot of so many people who were in relationships that might not be passionate or exhilarating, but that were satisfactory enough . . . *Satisfactory*: such faint praise, such a second prize . . . And yet, for most people, that is all that came their way in this life. They lived in hope of being swept off their feet, but that did not happen, and they accepted it. It was not so bad being *a bit in love*, or *in love to an extent*.

Life, for most people, was something that just happened to them. They were not the authors of the script – it was simply there, and they read out the part allotted to them. And in the background, like the clockwork that kept the whole thing going, was simple chance. It occurred to Neil then that had he not walked into that Turkish barbershop he would not be here: he would not have met Chrissie and they would not be planning to live together. They might even end up getting married – because that was what people who lived together often did. Although neither had said anything about that yet. If they did, of course, then his choice of life partner would have been determined by the sheer chance of needing a haircut at that particular time. He reminded himself that that was probably the same for just about everything that happened to us. We imagined that our lives were shaped by choices we made: it was not like that at all, or only to a limited extent. Our lives were the creations of chance, of hazard, of events that in many cases took place long before our conception. We were old business, warmed up for a new present and an uncertain future. But that understanding, although unsettling to some, should not necessarily detract from any pleasure that we might take in life, and at that moment, Neil knew that he

was content. He had an interesting and secure job; he was in a stable relationship with a woman whom most people would regard as something of a catch; and he had somewhere to live. If he had to sit down and write out a list of things he needed but did not have, he would have been hard-pressed to come up with anything. The Turkish barbershop in Glasgow had done him proud.

Chrissie's bid for the flat was successful, and they moved in two months later. They chose their furniture together, equipping it with an eclectic mixture of Victorian and modern. Chrissie discovered that she enjoyed browsing in antiques warehouses, and came up with a series of bargains – items that others would not wish to clutter their houses with but which looked just right, she said, in their late nineteenth-century flat. She took time off to go to auctions, and came back with objects for which Neil saw little use: a Victorian what-not stand, a folding campaign desk, an American rocking chair that creaked with each movement. She bought books on oriental carpets and covered the floor with tribal art woven in some distant village. Neil smiled at all this: it was her flat and her money, and he approved of her colour sense.

They built up a circle of friends. Some of these were the squash players with whom Neil played every Friday evening; others were old school friends of Chrissie. One or two of them were people she had met at antiques fairs or auctions. They went to each other's houses for dinner at weekends; sometimes they went for walks together in the hills to the south of Edinburgh.

It was after one of these walks that Neil asked Chrissie if she was happy.

"Why ask that?" she responded.

He shrugged. "Because most of the time people don't think about how they feel about their lives. They just let them happen."

She frowned. "Do you think I'm unhappy? Is that what you think?"

"Of course not. I didn't say anything about you being unhappy. I merely wanted to know whether . . . everything was all right."

She gave him a sideways look. "Is it because my postdoc's almost expired?"

He shook his head. "No, I wasn't thinking about that." He paused. "That's not worrying you, is it?"

She assured him it was not. "I don't really care," she said. "In fact, I'm done with the way they fund science in this country. They force us to apply for grants every few years. Where's the job security in that?" She fixed him with a slightly accusing stare. "You don't have to worry. You're lucky. You have a permanent job. Not everybody has your luck."

He knew that he was fortunate. But he didn't want his good fortune to accentuate the uncertainties in her career, and her comment made him feel uncomfortable: he was prepared to accept that luck might play some part, but there was much more to it than that. He felt that he had his job because he had worked to achieve it: to say that he was lucky was to suggest that there had simply been a roll of the dice, and he had been fortunate enough to have guessed the right number. He looked at her, and wondered whether she thought that he had his job because of sheer chance rather than as through personal effort. She had no right to think that.

"Something will turn up," he said. "It always does."

He could tell that she was unconvinced.

"I doubt it," she said. "They're cutting back. And anyway, I'm not sure that I want to carry on with this job. What's the point?"

He was unprepared for this. "But I thought that microbiology was . . ."

She did not let him finish. "There are other ways of spending your life, you know. Microbiology's not the only thing."

"No," he said hesitantly. "It's not. But if you're a microbiologist, then isn't microbiology the thing you should be doing?"

She laughed. "There are hundreds of other careers. Hundreds."

He waited a few moments before saying, "What will you do instead?"

"I'm not saying that I'm going to do anything different. I may carry on being a microbiologist. I probably will. Or . . ."

She left the sentence unfinished.

"Or what?"

She waved a hand airily. "Or I could do something radically different. Interior decoration, for instance. I rather fancy that."

It was the first he had heard of that, and he waited for more of an explanation. She was looking at him, as if weighing up whether to say more. Evidently, she decided that she would. "I've been looking at a course."

He waited.

"It's part-time," she went on. "You can take the course at your own pace. You get a tutor. Mine's in Edinburgh. You meet online."

He was not sure what to say. Was she trying to tell him something – that she did not care? If she resented his success, then she might have wanted to do that. He could reassure

her; he could say, "Look, I'm no threat to you." Or, "You don't have to prove anything to me." Something like that.

"You seem surprised," she said, after a while.

"Well, yes, I am – a bit. You never mentioned anything."

"Well, now I am," she said. "It's interesting. I like it. It's not microbiology."

"Well . . ."

"There's a case for developing entirely different skills," she said. "And, if I did have a career change, I could always go back later."

"Of course." He was doubtful, though. Science was competitive: those who went off, often found it impossible to get back in.

He looked at her. "Is the air full of the smoke of burning boats?" he asked.

She laughed. "Yes. Thick with it." And then she added, "You mustn't worry about it, Neil. Whatever happens, I'm not going to starve." She looked at him enquiringly. "Would you support me if I were broke? I mean, flat broke. Without a penny – literally."

He said that he would. Her enquiring look became one of bemusement. "You're so solid," she said.

He asked her what she meant by that.

"Nothing, really. I don't mean that you're . . . solid, in the sense of *heavy*. In fact, I don't think I meant to say it. Sorry."

"But you did think it?"

She turned away. "You mustn't try to read my thoughts," she said. "I was thinking of reliability, I suppose – you're reliable."

He held her gaze. "And you are too."

"Am I?" She did not seem convinced. Then she said, "Let's talk about something different."

They did, but he continued to think of this curious, unsettling conversation. He had the impression she was keeping something from him, but he was not sure what it might be. He had thought that there were few, if any, secrets you could conceal from a person you lived with; cohabitation, it seemed to him, was a particular form of nakedness. But perhaps he was wrong; perhaps that was wishful thinking. You could, he knew, fundamentally misunderstand the person with whom you lived; there were many who discovered that, to their dismay, even when they thought it inconceivable.

He asked himself: what if you stopped trusting those who were closest to you? He found it hard to imagine the chasm of utter loneliness that must open up once trust was lost. How could one sleep, knowing that the other might be awake, watching you, calculating, awaiting a chance to betray? Or laughing at you, perhaps, behind your back?

He put these thoughts out of his mind. They had simply talked about the possibility of doing something different; there was nothing essentially destabilising about that. Chrissie was experiencing what everyone felt when they came to the end of a postdoctoral contract. She would be wondering whether this was the end of her academic career and whether she would have to do something quite different – something for which she may feel herself unequipped. There would be lab work, of course, that was always available, but it tended to be routine and unrewarding in every sense – the equivalent of mundane work in a manufacturing industry. He could understand why she would view the prospect with foreboding.