

I

LOOK. LOOK CAREFULLY, PLEASE. The moment you turn away, everything changes and, when you look back, you'll have forgotten that for which you were searching.

First, let your eye be drawn to me: young, straight-backed and certain. I was peering over the edge of a ferry, Sea of the Hebrides churning below. It had become my habit to stand on the deck and watch for whales during the slow journey to the island. The trick, I had found, was to soften the vision, to allow the hem of the sky to fray into the sea, to take in everything at once. Then, when a fin bursts through, the landscape gathers about it and the eye cannot help but be drawn.

The little ferry seldom made this journey, due to lack of demand. On most of my previous trips I had been the only passenger. But on this occasion, my fifth visit since I'd returned from the war, there was another man with me. From inside, he flung open the cabin door and bolted across the deck, slipping on the spume-slick metal, crashing into the barrier. The column of vomit which left his mouth was thick and yellow, with the sour stench of a rich diet. It travelled in a heavy arc, out over the edge of the ferry and into the water below. Afterwards, the man remained clutching the barrier, chest heaving. He was hairless and resembled a gourd stuffed into an expensive suit, with folds turned down at the outer corners of his eyes, making him seem perpetually sombre.

I hurried across to him, held the barrier with one hand and, with the other, rummaged in my woollen coat for a cigarette to offer.

'All great introductions include the expulsion of bodily fluids,' the man said between gasps. 'Colm Hubert. Good to meet you.'

'Euan—'

'Oh yes, I know.'

I paused.

He stood a little taller and peered at me from under his solemn folds. 'We have the same patron,' he said. 'I am Malcolm Furnivall's solicitor . . .' He vomited again, dabbed the corners of his mouth with an embroidered silk handkerchief. 'Seasickness,' he said. 'Just seasickness . . .'

'Smoke?' I pulled out two hand-rolled cigarettes from my leather cigarette case.

He took one gladly, widened his eyes as I lit it for him. 'Liquorice papers,' he said.

After the war I'd started using these brown papers to handroll my cigarettes. A small luxury I allowed myself. I shrugged, lit my own, then tucked the cigarette case back into the inner pocket of my coat, watching the late-morning sun dance off the waves.

'I have read your books,' Colm said.

I watched him, hoping he would not vomit again.

'Very engaging,' he said. 'Yes, very engaging. You must be proud to have come so far.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Oh, I meant it as a compliment. It is my business to pay attention to those closest to Malcolm.' Upon seeing my expression, he hastened to add, 'From humble beginnings to

Malcolm Furnivall's protégé. Tell me, is he as the rumours describe?'

'You haven't met him?'

Colm caught my gaze, held it, then laughed. 'Forgive me. I ought to hold my tongue. This journey has rattled my nerves.'

We smoked together. I tapped ash into the wind. 'If it's not too indelicate to ask, Colm . . . why are you here?'

He examined his silk handkerchief, grimaced, then, in a flourish, cast it over the side of the boat. With a look of exhaustion, he said, 'I don't . . . at this current moment . . . know.'

'You don't know?'

'I received an invitation to the island, a ticket for the ferry and a generous sum of money. Though my firm has represented Malcolm for many years, I have never met him. Never even spoken with him. He asked specifically for me in his letter . . . Perhaps he knew of my seasickness, wished for nothing more than to play a cruel joke.'

I laughed. 'Are you sure you don't know him?'

A wry smile crossed Colm's face. He took a deep breath, turned his body away from me. He scrunched his face, spat a gobbet overboard, stared out at the horizon. 'You visit him often?'

'Yearly.' I looked away from Colm, watched the seabirds circling, the waves being shorn apart by the ferry's bow. I wished I'd visited more often over the past five years, but I'd been working hard, dividing my time between writing, lecturing at Oxford and maintaining my empty childhood home on the coast of Edinburgh, which seemed intent on mouldering. Colleagues asked me why I didn't sell it. To

them, my regular shuttling from Oxford to Edinburgh seemed absurd. But I was not like them; whenever I returned to that poor house, I was reminded of the gulf between us, which, I think, is the reason I kept it. On my way to visit Malcolm, I would stay overnight in the house, recalling the smell of my father's cigarette smoke, of mildew and grease. Those nights I would not sleep. I would lie awake, waiting for a knock on the door, for my past to come spilling in.

I pulled up my sleeve, glanced at the scratched face of my ATP wristwatch I'd received as a private and refused to upgrade. It read eleven o'clock.

Colm's eyes settled on the watch, a tightness in his expression.

'Malcolm wrote to me when the war was done,' I said. 'I'd begun lecturing at the university, writing on the side. One of my essays was published in *Horizon*, a piece about Malcolm's work. A week later, he wrote to me, asking if I had any manuscripts I was looking to publish. At first, I thought it was a hoax; one of my students seeking revenge after a particularly boring lecture.' I smiled at the memory. 'I just couldn't believe that he'd discovered my writing, let alone enjoyed it enough to contact me. After corresponding for a while, he invited me to his home, helped get my novels into print. We've stayed in touch ever since.'

'And you sensed nothing different in his invitation this time?'

'No.'

We smoked quietly.

'You want to say something,' I said. 'Say it.'

Colm straightened his tie, ran his hands down the front of his coat. 'I have it on good authority that he has summoned

his children to his estate . . . He is gathering those closest to him. If something substantial is to happen, it might be an idea for you and I, the two outsiders, to become friendly. You understand me?’

‘Yes,’ I said, offering a smile. ‘I understand you.’

Malcolm rarely spoke of his children, Clara and Lewis. They had moved to the mainland before the war, leaving only Malcolm and his wife, Anwen, behind. Malcolm had become increasingly absorbed in research for his new novel, separating himself from those around him. A month previous, Clara appeared at a lecture I was giving, accosting me afterwards and enquiring after her father. She said she feared for his health, that he was losing touch with reality. She demanded that I bring him back, said I was the only one who could. Though she had tried to hide it, I’d sensed her desperation. Clara, it seemed, was not accustomed to asking for help.

Colm patted me on the arm, leant in close. ‘Are you sure there was nothing different about his invitation?’

I thought back to what Malcolm had written in his last letter. He’d mentioned his research, comparing himself to the physicist Werner Heisenberg, who had isolated himself upon the island of Helgoland to gain insight into the bizarre forces of the universe. Malcolm, too, had shut himself away to pursue his masterwork. Even in his writing, I sensed a change in him, a distance. Only briefly had he mentioned a ‘troublesome’ cough, but that line, over all others, gave me concern.

‘There was nothing in his invitation that concerned me,’ I said.

Colm narrowed his eyes, finished the cigarette I’d

given him, flicked it away. He watched the island as we approached it: vertiginous slopes black with pines. 'What has Malcolm promised you?' he asked. There was a sly note in his voice.

I tapped my thumb to each of my forefingers, turned away from him. 'If you need me, I'll be port side,' I said. 'I'll leave you to your ejections.'

'Wait—'

I stopped, turned back to him. His hand was outstretched, and everything about him was pitiable.

'I fear we have not been honest with each other,' he said. 'I think our experience . . . our *shared* experience, has taught us to be wary. I, too, was overseas.'

I rolled my eyes, moved to leave. Men like him sat in smoking rooms, laughing and dining as they sent boys like me to die.

'It is not seasickness,' he said.

'What?'

'I have been ingenuine. But my motive was only to save some discomfort.'

'Considerate of you.'

Colm gave a pained smile. 'When I was a boy, my friend and I would visit Cramond Island. You know it? We would race the tide, running there and back before the water swallowed up the path. One evening, we weren't fast enough. The tide took us, pulled us out to sea. I was a better swimmer so tried to keep him afloat . . . but I didn't have the strength. I saw him drowning. I couldn't pull him up and he started to drag me down with him. I wouldn't let go. I breathed in the saltwater, trying to shout for help . . . That sensation has stayed with me. A terrible way to die. I think the only reason

sailors tell each other that it is warm and peaceful is to keep their courage up.' He paused, remembering. 'Someone pulled me from the water, but my friend was gone. I have felt nauseous around the sea ever since . . . Now I have been honest with you. Will you return the favour?'

I finished my cigarette, stubbed it out on the barrier, tucked the filter into my pocket to be disposed of later. After scrutinising the bulbous man, I spoke curtly. 'You want to know why I've come?'

He nodded.

'I've lost something. And I want it back.'

As he opened his mouth to speak, the nausea overcame him again, and he closed his eyes, lowered his chin to his chest, breath hitching in his throat.

I hadn't yet said it aloud, but it was true. My work had dried up, as had my life. In the past few months, memories of my time in France had plagued me and I had withdrawn, produced very little. When thinking back to when I was happiest, I returned, always, to bright spring days spent with the Furnivalls, to Malcolm's wild laugh and warm conversation. I think, as I stood upon that ferry, that I hoped to rediscover that joy.

I looked out over the water, saw waves crashing against the island. The spring sky was divine blue, the sun cold and bright. The smell of salt was on the air. Reinvigorated, I listened to the hymns of the wind, feeling, for the first time in recent memory, hopeful.

Colm muttered something, but his words swept past me.

I smiled, still facing outward, gaze drifting to a movement beneath the waves.

'What in God's name are you grinning at?' Colm said.

There, the pleated throat of a minke whale as it rolled in the wake of the ferry. I said nothing. I only watched as it fell behind, disappearing in the foam. Quiet. I kept my eye on the water.

The minke burst from the surface, hung in mid-air, then crashed back into the waves, leaving behind a column of briny mist.

'Did you see it?' I asked.

'See what?' Colm replied.