

In Another Light

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Published by Weidenfeld &
Nicolson

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PART 1

Likely the smell of it came to him first.

He opened his eyes in the grey pre-dawn and for the first time smelled the sweetness and sickliness that lay ahead. Ginger, frangipani, acanthus and jacaranda and untold acres of rubber – all those abundances that he'd never known, which until a year ago meant as little to me.

He moved like a trout in one of the burns of his childhood – one pale flick and he was kneeling at the open porthole. He stared into the dimness as a darker shape emerged off the port bow: humped wooded hills, a long ridge rising to a peak, and now first light breaking into a high corrie – surely the word came to him, he had no other.

Henderson the Canadian mining engineer – and how many hours of eyestrain over the micro-fiche it took me to get that name – was still snoring, the boat's engines thumped and grumbled as they had for nearly two weeks across the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, but now everything has changed: landfall, maybe an hour ahead.

I have him now as he stares into the yellow Far East dawn while the boat rounds Muka Head. I see the long powerful nose, heavy-lobed ears, the mouth that has not yet become obstinate, and his grey-blue eyes wary, alert, excited, measuring. He's hunkered down like a schoolboy at the porthole in striped pyjama bottoms, his long back pale and still skinny: my father at an age I never knew him, the old man as a young man first sighting Penang.

1

I woke and went up on deck once the ferry was well past the Old Man. The high red headlands of Hoy receded until we were into the turbulence where the tide race emptying Scapa Flow greets the oncoming Atlantic. There was a period of unpleasantness, then I was coming one more time round the Point of Ness towards the little town sheltering under Brinkies Brae.

I smelled once again cut grass and seaweed, glimpsed the pier where she, the window where I, the cafe where they once, and if my stomach lurched it wasn't on account of the swell. The *St Ola* slowly swung round till I was looking at the tidal Holms and the cottages where we'd disgraced ourselves.

I turned away and went below to collect my car. A couple of glances came my way, but I kept my head down. Four months away and not forgotten yet.

Bright daylight as the bow doors opened. First off, my old Audi lurched, bumped up, then I was back on holy ground once more. No reception committee at the pier head, but the jungle drums would already be beating as I headed out of Stromness towards the rendezvous.

Stevie Corrigan was waiting in his pick-up by the shores of Harray loch. We shook hands, grinning and a little embarrassed in the way of people who meet again and realise how much they like and have missed each other but don't know how to say so.

'I've rounded up the gear you asked for,' Stevie said.

'Thanks,' I said. 'Appreciate it.'

'So how's the memory these days?' he asked casually as we transferred the equipment into my car.

'I can't remember having a problem with it.'

He laughed, but after a moment of hesitation. I didn't resent it. Only looking back can you see how not all right you once were. I hefted his bolt-cutters, heavy-duty and newly sharpened. Good.

He was still looking at me.

'Don't ask,' I said, then stowed them in the boot with the rest of the kit. Sometimes you go to do something wrong knowing it's right.

'Don't need to,' he said. 'You'll be doing this on your own?'

'Like as not,' I replied.

I think he guessed then the arrangements I'd made.

'Go canny, Eddie,' he said. 'Come and see us after it's done.'

For a moment I looked directly into his round brown eyes. I knew he still felt he owed me on account of what he'd done – more accurately, what he didn't do – at that desperate Hogmanay party on the Holms, but that wasn't what I'd come back to set right.

'Thanks for everything,' I said, and we shook on that. He drove off without asking more, a tactful man.

I drove slowly on the back roads, adjusting again to Orcadian light, so thin and pale yet stinging the eyes. After months cooped up in Stoke Newington, working late into the night as *The Project* began to produce results, it was good and strange to be back moving under that wide wind-polished sky, the land like an old green tarpaulin dragged out of the North Sea, glinting pools of water in its folds, the material bleached by salt and wind and light to pale yellow, brown and olive. Few trees, no hedges, just water, sky and land.

It's a place of healing all right, but not for the faint-hearted.

I was tempted in the hours remaining to visit again the places that had mattered to me, but for now it was better to keep a low profile. So I drove straight to Evie – not so much a village as a tendency of houses – through the late September afternoon, then turned down the single track road that leads to the Broch of Gurness.

I didn't go right to it, though I could see its ruined stone tower like a squat pepperpot half a mile along the shore. Instead I turned onto a farm track I'd remembered and parked in behind the half-ruined barn facing the sea – nothing so blatant as hiding, just not being very visible.

Now I settle down to wait with flask, sandwiches, and a bunch of things I don't forget. It will be hours till dusk brings cover, enough time to consume them all if I pace myself.

I pour the first coffee, set it on the dashboard, and consider.

It began as a headache. The grainy bitterness of aspirin was still in my mouth that afternoon when young Cath turned up. I let her in, wondering how I'd got to an age where my friends' children came to stay on their way to job interviews.

By the time I'd made our tea, I couldn't eat any. I'd had headaches regularly for much of my life, but this was bad. I told her I'd stay in.

'You'll be all right?' she asked at the door. I looked up from where I sat massaging both temples.

'Sure,' I said.

I barely made it to the sink in time. Then I rinsed and spat and sat on the edge of the bath with the sweat already turning clammy. Not nice, not nice at all.

I took more painkillers and went to watch TV. Then I was back at the sink. Afterwards I changed my shirt, it was wringing. To the growling timpani in my head, some lightning had been added. Bear it. *Thole it*, as the old man would have said.

I heard Cath come in, glanced at my watch, just gone 1 a.m. Long night ahead. I groaned and retched some more into the bedside bowl. By now it was green – stomach acids or lining, I wasn't sure. She tapped on my bedroom door. I was very glad to see someone. Pain is your own but it helps to have someone around who isn't in pain, to remind you such a thing is possible.

'Eddie! For God's sake, are you all right?'

I twisted my neck and looked up at her. She was subtly strobe lit in little flashes, and with the drums and lightning and hiss in my ears it was as if we were meeting in a jungle in a tropical storm. I'd a clear memory of holding her when she was a few weeks old, marvelling at blue eyes and jet-black hair.

'Just . . . rotten . . . headache,' I managed then rolled onto my back. There was an easing after the stomach spasm, like coolness after rain. I blinked, gasped, let it come.

She was standing over the bed looking down at me. I was myself enough to notice what a bonnie young woman my god-daughter had become, and to be embarrassed she saw me like this. Right now she looked worried.

'I think we should get a doctor,' she said.

Doctor came. Young Aussie on the night shift. Shone light in my eyes,

checked for a rash, left codeine. Call the surgery in the morning if it persists. Then he was gone, she was gone, and I dug in.

I was dimly aware of her up and about making breakfast. If I can hold down this next lot of codeine. Sleep. Get to surgery.

Her hand on my shoulder.

'I've got to go for my interview,' she said. 'Do you want me to call an ambulance? Eddie?'

Ambulance? I want sleep and no pain, not fuss. Ambulance for accidents and hearts. My heart good.

'No,' I said. 'S all right.'

She kept looking down at me. I was soaking and stripped of pretences. Some brief easing was coming after the last stomach heave.

'Okay,' she said. Then she was at the door, half in half out. 'Look, are you sure? Shall I phone the ambulance?'

It was an impulse, no more. A moment of weakening, or self-preservation. Whatever, it's why I'm still here.

'Yes,' I said.

My bare foot on wet pavement as they carried me



Dr Alexander Mackay stands in the lifeboat's shadow, out of the sun that has turned violent ever since Port Said. The breeze of the *Amelia's* passage across the Indian Ocean stirs in his open-necked white shirt – he knows that in Penang he will have to wear a tie much of the time but on board it is acceptable, just, to go without, and he's making the most of it.

A particular sound had fetched him from his stuffy cabin and *Modern Obstetrical Procedures*. He'd cocked his head, listened till it came again. That whip-crack-*wheesh* that is no other sound in the world. That went along with the smell of salt and gorse and cut grass carried on a cooler, clearer air. When it came again, exactly so, he had to come up onto deck to see if it could be true.

And it is. He's seen some odd sights over the last few weeks, but this takes the biscuit. On the fore deck the young American chap from the corridor above, in checked plus-fours, two-tone brogues, open necked shirt and maroon cap, waggles a long iron over a golf ball teed on coconut matting. He sights up at the horizon, down at the ball, steadies. Easy backswing, slight snatch on the way down, good follow through. Crack! The ball soars out over blue, increasingly veers to the left, a tiny white eruption where it hits the water and is gone.

The golfer mutters to himself, selects and tees up another ball from the bucket. Alexander watches, amused and intrigued. He spent much of his adolescence on the local links, whenever he wasn't studying. Golf was the local game of the East Coast, played by fishermen, farmers, tradesmen and artisans, men like his father. The game you struggle with all your life, but never ever master, that will always humiliate. Only a Presbyterian country could invent it, and though Alexander Mackay is a convinced atheist following certain events in the past he's put behind him, he is a Presbyterian atheist and he cares about golf.

This golfer is a good one but presses too hard on the downswing, his left side not braced enough. No surprise that the ball whistles off the deck then sharply ducks into the sea. A wee flutter of white, then gone.

'Damn and blast it!'

Alexander emerges from the shadow. He can't help it. A fellow sufferer.

'Nasty hook,' he observes.

The young man looks up, grins ruefully, takes off his cap and wipes his forehead. It is grilling out on the open deck.

'Yeah,' he says. 'Can't seem to shake it. Any suggestions?'

He's much Alexander's age, around thirty, shorter and broader, dark hair brilliantined back.

'Let me see you hit another couple.'

He watches closely. First one ball then another, their flight variations on the ones before. Plenty of power, good loft, consistent pull to the left. Then he gives his diagnosis. The grip – the right hand's too far round, get the V back pointing to the shoulder. And keep your left side straight, hit past not round it.

The American listens closely, nods. He knows this, but sometimes it takes someone else to notice. He tries again. His first is a feeble slice, the next couple are absolute sizzlers, the balls fall so far out there's just a tiny fleck of white.

'Bobby Jones himself would be proud of that,' Alexander says.

The young man blushes. For all his vigour, he's oddly pale, and the doctor in Alexander Mackay wonders if he's been ill.

'Gee, thanks,' he says. 'Do you think he's going to win your Open?'

'Wouldn't be surprised.'

'Hey, are you Scotch?'

'Scotch is for drinking.' Still he smiles. Something open and unaffected about this chap. He approves of Americans, their lack of side. He holds out his hand. 'Alexander Mackay. Doctor. Bound for Penang.'

'Alan Hayman. Water engineer. Penang and the Interior.'

They shake hands then take turns hitting balls into the big blue. They discover an equal level of ability. Good but not outstanding, like himself, would be Alexander's inner verdict. No point deluding oneself. Still, after a childhood of searching for balls in gorse and rough, it's liberating to fire them off into oblivion, just for the heck of it.

The ship's bell dongs twice for the second lunch sitting and they go in together to eat, passing with thankfulness from brilliant light into shade. Alexander wipes away sweat that's running from his hairline.

'I suppose this is how it's going to be from here on,' he says.

'I guess so,' Hayman replies. A big grin splits his chunky face. 'Spiffing, ain't it!'



In shadowlands, in a blue room where spectral figures hurried with an urgency I could not feel. Looking up at blue stippled ceiling and always choking. Shades hasten with their apparatus on wheels. Something in my throat too big, can't breathe. Can't bear this much longer.

My father came and talked with me. He was sympathetic and encouraging as I seldom knew him. *I've something to show you, laddie. Meant to tell you afore.* He seemed apologetic as he went away and then it was difficult again. More scurrying figures, more blue ceiling, more can't breathe. Panic rising hot in my throat like reflux, up then swallowed down but always there.

Graeme visited. Good to see him looking well as he cracked a few jokes, put his hand quite tenderly on my arm. *Think of Glencoe on a hard February morning – you, me and Jimmy setting out.* He was gone, but he came back from time to time when it got bad, sometimes with my dad. They seemed to get on well, like old friends. I was touched at that.

There was a gap. Still the hurrying shades seemed tense and distant, couldn't get them to help. There was someone I badly wanted to see, one whose presence would help support me, but I didn't know who that would be. Tina came to my bedside instead, which was dead nice of her. She was looking much better than the last time. *You just keep breathing. Picture that sunset at Bettyhill.* She smiled and pressed something cool, smooth and rectangular into my palm and that helped. *I'll be seeing you.*

She left and though she wasn't quite the one I missed her badly as I gripped whatever she'd given me.

2

The sun's chopped to pieces out there on the Sound. With the car window down I can hear terns piping shrill and the distant roar of the tide race by Eynhallow. A seal pops up, rotates its shining head like a whiskery periscope, submerges again.

It's worth knowing it wasn't so frightful, being in what I came to think of as the blue shadowlands, that place where you lie knowing you may be going to die. It's just lonely and uneasy, a good place to have a friend come keep you company as you wait to see what happens next.

I swallow cooling coffee and taste again the coarse, ambiguous sweetness of not being dead.

Brother's eyes looking on me.

Stippled ceiling and room the same, only it's all white now. People in white bustling in hush. Someone takes big thing out of my throat. It hurts, but much better. Still hissing mask over my face. Then brother's voice, speaking slowly.

'You've been very ill. You're in hospital. You're going to be okay.'

He talks like I'm a simple.

'You understand?' he says. 'Eddie?'

Alive, eyes open, seeing.

'Yes,' I manage.

It seems to please him. He's gripping my hand and that helps. I know who he is, he's my brother, but I can't find his name. I wonder who it was that hadn't visited me in the blue shadowlands. If I could work out who. I open my other hand but it's empty.

'They said you might be brain-damaged,' he says. 'And I said "How would we tell?"'

He starts to laugh, and I feel glad to be back again so I do too.

One of the white coats, spectral no longer, comes over and shines in my eyes. Asks who the Prime Minister is.

'Easy,' I say. 'It's ...'

I think Nye Bevan, William Pitt, Gladstone bag. Brother and doctor looking at me. Look, I've just been born and can't be expected.

I start reciting *Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands* to show memory all right. I'm well into the second verse when the doctor leaves hastily, says someone will be back later to do more tests. My brother sits on. What is his name? I'm very tired and close my eyes.

Back again. No headache but hissy mask clammy on my face. I look to see how things are. Lots of tubes, some in back of hand, in arm. Monitor screen like on TV, bouncing jaggy green lines. It's true, I'm alive.

I pull at the mask and it comes off my face. Look at my brother.

'Oxygen mask,' I say. 'Peter.'

'Yes,' he says. 'Same old brilliant bro.'

I nod modestly. Look at plastic bags hung up to my left. Clear bags like what goldfish in at fairs. Tubes looping to me.

'What they, Pete?'

'I think that one's saline and antibiotic. The other's your brain fluid.'

Drops oozing from the tube. Bag half full. My brain fluid. It looked slightly thick and greasy, like that near-clear fat on top of gravy.

'Jings.'

Nurse comes with clipboard. 'We need to know your next of kin, Mr Mackay. Who is your next of kin?'

Peter and I look at each other. I'd never thought on it that way. Sounds like funeral notice.

'I suppose our mother,' he says. 'She's on her way.'

As he gives the details, I think: should be love of my life at bedside and in shadowland. My closest kin. Who she? What had Dad meant to show me? And slept.