# The Blue Cabin

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Extract

# THE BLUE CABIN

## Living by the tides on Islandmore

MICHAEL
FAULKNER

BLACKSTAFF
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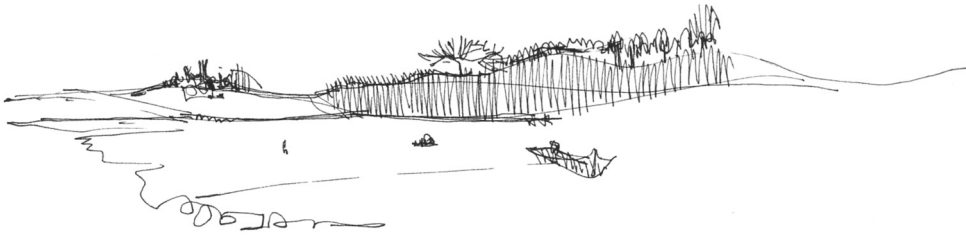
BELFAST



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*To my mother,*
*who pushed gently from behind;*
*and my father, from above.*

# Prologue

On a Thursday morning we had spelling, and if you didn't get seventeen out of twenty, you were caned. Sometimes I scraped it but more often than not I found myself, along with Black II, Fumphy Friars and a serial misspeller named Denny Gibson, whose only mistake, it's frightening to speculate, was to be born dyslexic, bending over in front of the class for three of the best. I would cry a little, and afterwards I would run outside and round the back of the hedge to the woodworking shed for some comfort and solace from Willie Edgar, the school carpenter.

Willie was always making something and I always said, 'What are you making?' and he always said: 'A seebackroscope.'

'What does it do?'

'It's so you can see backwards.'

'Why?'

'Because we don't always know where we're going, so it's nice to know where we've been.'

'Can you make one for me?'

He would look down at me with a serious face, his spectacles off kilter and misted with fine sawdust, and shake his head.

'I could,' he would say. 'But it's a lot better to have two.'

I knew the answer to my next question very well but I loved to hear it anyway.

'Why?'

'Because if you take two seebackroscopes and mount them back to back, you can look through one and into the other, and see the future.

It's a double seebackroscope. Gives you something to look forward to.'

I was old enough to suspect that he wasn't being serious and young enough to hope that he was. Either way, from the point of view of impressing my friends, a seebackroscope sounded like a really good thing to have. I made Willie promise one day to build me a pair of them, and every time I ran into him after that I would ask if they were ready.

'I'm working on it,' he always said. 'They're on the bench.'

A couple of years went by without any sign of my seebackroscopes, and then something awful happened. When the time came to leave Mourne Grange, I went without saying goodbye to Willie Edgar. Afterwards I felt a terrible guilt, and to make matters worse, I convinced myself that the seebackroscopes were to have been his leaving present to me; that if I had just popped round to the shed, he would have been waiting for me, standing with his back to the workbench, holding something the size of a shoebox, wrapped in newspapers.

I'll never know. Soon after I left, Mourne Grange closed for good. I went on to another boarding school much further from home, and sadly Willie passed away some years ago – taking, I expect, the secret of the double seebackroscope with him.

Thirty-eight years on, I still think of him now and then, especially when I'm struggling to put things in perspective. I think I understand better now what he meant, and in lieu of the real thing I have contrived a pair of virtual seebackroscopes, which I use, with mixed results, to temper a dangerous tendency to dwell in the past. Such optimism as I possess is not innate, as my father's was, but acquired, albeit at the tender age of ten; and good old Willie Edgar, as a consequence, has earned himself a permanent place next to my father in my personal gallery of heroes.

# One

During a long and fretful night, when every small sound seemed to echo through the cheerless and empty rooms around us, we lay close and slept hardly at all. In the morning we settled the dogs in the car, found some room for the very last things out of the house in a cardboard box with 'Island' scrawled on the side, heaved the box into the van and left Quilchena for the last time.

Tried to leave anyway. We were all set, but to my shame it hadn't occurred to me that we would not actually be able to go together. I should have made sure the car was in Edinburgh, even along the road; perhaps then it would have been less painful. Perhaps the two of us could have jumped into the van and headed down the lane without looking back. As it was, neither of us seemed ready to make the first move and we shuffled awkwardly and silently about, wandering in and out of the courtyard, checking the sheds and the garden, double-checking the house. Delaying. We hardly looked at one another, tried not to look at anything probably, and we said little. Bewildered and panicked that the moment had finally come, we were past words, but we each knew that with every step we drew on the other's reserves of strength, and of course we should have been together when we left.

Eventually, out of excuses, I headed, as I thought, purposefully towards the van. Looking back at Lynn I tried to say something, no doubt less than helpful, like 'Let's go then', but I have a tendency to mumble which is much worse in stressful situations. 'Lengo thany hon eh,' I said, and jerked my head over my shoulder, thumbing inanely in the direction of the road. When she opened the car door to get in,

I climbed up into the van to drive ahead of her out of the courtyard, but there was no sign of her in the rear-view mirror, so I stopped and walked back.

She was sitting with the engine running, clutching the steering wheel with one white-knuckled hand, a sodden handkerchief in the other. Tears flowed freely from the point of her chin. Her fist – her whole forearm – glistened. She was unable to bring herself to drive away.

Looking down at her, I felt the same cocktail of emotions – tenderness, guilt, fear – that had given me sleepless nights for months. Guilt especially. It was not, after all, her fault that it had come to this: her business had not failed. If anything, her career had been gaining momentum. Demand from the galleries for her work, hard to satisfy at the best of times, had not let up just because we were in difficulties, and she had felt, I think, that it was more important than ever to maintain some kind of continuity, for sanity as much as for cash flow. So against the odds she had worked on until just a few weeks before the move, alternately painting and filling packing cases in her studio. Somehow she managed to keep creating even as the wall of boxes grew around her, until eventually she disappeared behind it. Embattled but steadfast, her work became more than ever an escape and she continued to fulfil commitments, turning down nothing and miraculously, it seemed to me, finding from somewhere within herself the inspiration to keep producing work of real quality.

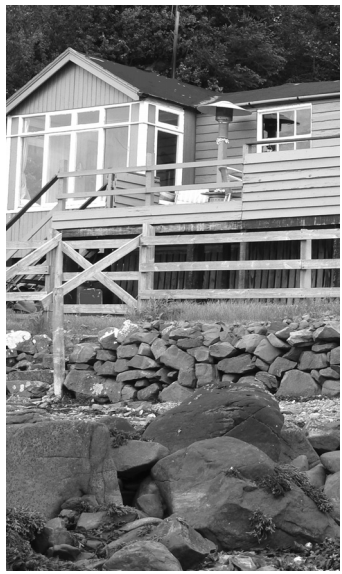
And for many months she had watched helplessly while I exhausted myself in a series of futile fire-fighting exercises to try to save the business, the house, the reassuring pattern of our lives; stitching together one refinancing package after another, living on borrowed time and money, dreaming of better days – stumbling into insolvency. For almost two years she had hung over the precipice to which I had led her and it seemed exquisitely unfair that at this crucial moment she should be asked to cut the rope herself, to freefall into the darkness that seemed to be our future.

In the emotional charge of those last minutes, as she tried to summon the courage to drive away from her beloved Quilchena – the one place where her personal life and artistic life had truly come together, perhaps the most meaningful expression of her creative energies, certainly the answer to an instinctive and uncompromising nest-building yen that had been a driving force since childhood –

everything seemed out of proportion. The simple act of pressing on the accelerator had become the ultimate act of will. An instant was an age.

She looked up and started to say, 'I don't want …'; and in those words, I believe, lay the worst pain of all. *I don't want to leave my Dad.* On the other side of the courtyard archway was the one remaining place that held any meaningful connection with her father, where the two of them had walked the same ground and breathed the same air. The catalyst had been a shared passion for growing things and a boundless appetite, on Lynn's part, to learn; and the vegetable garden they created together had become their private meeting place, filled for eight precious years with their laughter and their love. After her father had gone, that's where she would go to find him, and now that she was leaving Quilchena she was saying goodbye all over again. It felt, to her, like a double bereavement.

I had a moment of inspiration. Our nearest neighbour, and in recent weeks our most dependable visitor at Quilchena, had been a formidable five-year-old called Sam Hawkins. Having been uprooted from friends, and as far as he was concerned all things safe and familiar, by his parents' move from Edinburgh that spring, Sam found himself standing at Big Crossroads of Life and turned his small steps with characteristic purpose towards Quilchena; specifically towards Lynn. They became firm friends, and in terms of moral support, to some extent mutually dependent. Aware, because she had been at pains to explain it to him, that his new best friend would soon be leaving for a distant and mysterious Island, Sam was persuaded by a plan cooked up between Lynn and his parents that it would actually be a Good Thing: as soon as we knew our completion date, plane tickets were booked for his first trip to come and stay, and Lynn looked out a photograph of the cabin where we intended to live, over which she and Sam made plans for all those swimming, boating and exploring adventures to come.



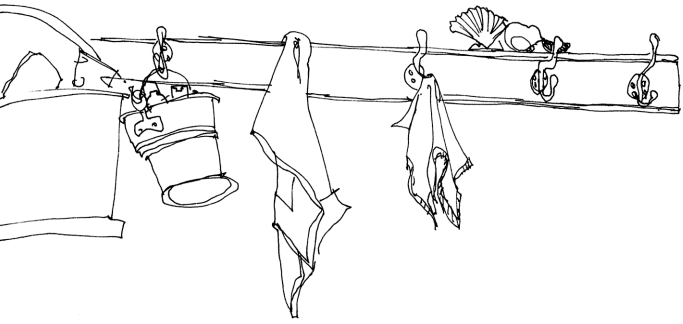
Meantime, and to Lynn's eternal gratitude, Sam fell into an unchanging routine. Every morning he would pull his wellingtons

over his pyjamas, sometimes leaving the house before his father, who commuted to Edinburgh, and set off on a commute of his own, skirting round the sheep field, climbing the stock fence with its top strand of barbed wire, running through the shrub bed, across the back yard, round the side of the steading and up to the kitchen door, where he would skid to a halt and knock politely before entering to take up his position, breathless and expectant, at the table next to the Aga. Normally I was the first one down and would pour myself another cup of coffee and fetch Sam's breakfast – apple juice and pitta bread. The two of us would chat about this and that until Lynn appeared, and by the time I left for work they would be hard at it, lugging boxes to the studio or scrap timber to the eternal bonfire at the back of the house – a tireless and close-knit team of two.

I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that Sam's visits were crucial in helping Lynn through a difficult time. While he was there, she remained positive; whether for or because of him, even she doesn't know. Probably both. In any case, Sam came into my mind as we agonised in the courtyard, and I suggested we call in to see him, tell him cheerio; we could always pop back to the house in ten minutes if we had forgotten something.

Lynn nodded, took a deep breath. A familiar and reassuring look of determination came over her face, and soon our little convoy was bouncing off down the lane.

Of course, we never did go back.



# Two

Looking at it later, and even at the time in less self-absorbed moments, we felt foolish that while others had graver issues to deal with – illness, divorce, bereavement – we should have been so devastated by the loss of what one friend called 'only bricks and mortar'. And I have to say it is hard to explain. Back in 1990 business was good. We had both had enough of city life and were engaged to be married. We went looking for a cottage, with modest enough expectations: two bedrooms, a garden, preferably something close to water. A place where black cabs were unlikely to sit below the bedroom window at three in the morning with their engines running, but no more than forty-five minutes from Edinburgh.

I telephoned my lawyer to ask him to keep an eye open. As it happened, he had taken instructions from a client to divide up his Kinross-shire farm and sell it in lots. Most of the land had already gone privately to neighbouring farms but the house itself, with a few acres, had not yet been marketed. Would I be interested in having a look before it was advertised? It sounded on the big side but I said, 'Absolutely', and Lynn and I drove out the same day.

We were given a draft set of particulars: a single A4 sheet with no photograph and only the sketchiest description. 'Secluded farmhouse with steading courtyard … in need of some modernisation. Forty minutes from Edinburgh, in the first unspoilt valley north of the Forth estuary. Approx. 18 acres.' There was a photocopied Ordnance Survey map on the back, with directions. We should go four miles off the motorway and look for a lane to the left, lined with oak trees.

It was a foul February afternoon. The sky was dark and full, and snow at the road edges was turning to slush in heavy rain. As we left the motorway we had occasional glimpses of Nivingston Crags, a sheer wall of sandstone half a mile to our left, rising five hundred feet from the valley floor and marking the northern limit of Cleish Hills. Further out to north and west, the faint outlines of the Ochil and Lomond Hills hinted at a wildness neither of us had anticipated. Lynn looked over at me. She nodded and smiled, and I knew what she meant. It was like Alice and the looking glass: half a mile back we had shared six lanes of grey and featureless asphalt with the rest of humanity and we seemed now to have passed seamlessly into another world.

The feeling persisted when we found the lane and turned in. Clearly it hadn't seen use for some hours because the snow lay undisturbed, a carpet of white running straight ahead between the tall, rusted-copper lines of two beech hedges. Leafless trees rose at intervals on either side and at the far end we could see the stone-built corner of the house, or perhaps the steading.

And really that was it. We felt as though we were arriving home.

What we had seen from the road turned out to be one arm of a U-shaped steading, which together with the house itself formed the four sides of a courtyard big enough to turn a car in. There was room for a studio, workshop, garage, and all the storage we would ever need in the outbuildings.

The house was quite small, with rubble walls of ochre sandstone and grey whin. Originally a two-room cottage, an extra half-storey had been squeezed into the roof space and Victorian extensions had been added to each end at opposing right angles, giving the place a quirky, rather haphazard feel inside, with unexpected returns and corridors, as though it had evolved organically at the whim of seven or eight generations of occupants. Outside, an overgrown paddock led down past a bothy cottage to a burn, which formed the south boundary, and on all sides there were open views across meadow and farmland to the hills. It was charming and, best of all, the nearest house was a quarter of a mile away.

For us it was a blank canvas that we gave the best part of five years to filling. We started with the house and by the end almost nothing of the internal layout remained, several bedrooms and all the corridors falling to our somewhat obsessive quest for open spaces, for a blending

of living area and landscape as seamless as the Scottish winter would allow. In more than a passing nod to Santa Fe style, which we first saw in a friend's house in Santa Monica in 1989, this meant not only access and sightlines to the outside at all available points, but a literal echoing of the tones and textures of the countryside on the surfaces within.

This was Lynn's department. When we first wandered round sketching out ideas for the house, I know we were thinking along similar lines – with Lynn's artist's eye and my back-of-an-envelope furniture designs, we have a shared ability to visualise structure and space – but when it comes to seeing the detail of the end result as though it were already in place – the feel, the colour, the atmosphere – Lynn is the master. I did not realise it at the time, but during those first tentative explorations of the possibilities of the house, she was able to visualise ochre- and salmon-washed rough-plastered walls accented with terracotta ceramic tile inserts, pale weathered timber doors and flooring, driftwood lintels and, I wouldn't be surprised, the subtle little Navajo wheat-sheaf motifs she later painted at each end of the massive mantelpiece above the living-room fire.

Proud of what Lynn had achieved, when the remodelling was complete I sent off some slides and the house appeared on the cover of *Period Living* and then in a raft of other interiors magazines. Lynn was mortified, and agreed to each new photo session only for the sake of the PR value to my furniture business.

We called the house Quilchena, after the ranch in British Columbia where I worked during a gap year before law school. The name derives from Native American and French Canadian dialects and means, roughly, 'feather oaks'.

But for me Quilchena is more than a name. It is an aspiration, another life; a dream. My time in Canada as a teenager was perhaps the most fulfilled of my life, and I may have been trying to regain that place in my mind ever since. Quilchena is the frustrated cowboy in me. I have even tried to live the dream in my working life. After brief excursions into law and property, I found an unlikely opportunity to indulge myself in a career in furniture design and retail. In what turned out to be a misjudged and costly, but hugely enjoyable, exercise, we transformed a back alley in a rather genteel residential area of south Edinburgh into a Western township of the mid-1800s, cladding both sides of the 'street' with faithfully detailed false fronts until we had the

whole John Ford: saloon, grain store, log house, cantina, livery stables, railroad station and, of course, a sheriff's office.

All this to accommodate a range of furniture of my own design, inspired by the frontier furniture of the American southwest and, as far as I know, the first cohesive collection of its kind in the UK. It was expensive to manufacture and ultimately unprofitable to sell, but six days a week I got to go to my office via Main Street, El Pedro. As word got around I was approached by production companies and photographers, and El Pedro, Morningside, was the unlikely location during the nineties for fashion shoots, music videos and even a couple of television serials.

Sometimes I suppose I worry about myself. It didn't just start with a few months in a bunkhouse in western Canada. When I was seven or eight, we commandeered an old chicken house in the pony paddock of the family home in Seaforde, Northern Ireland. We covered the walls with cowboy and Indian wallpaper and fitted it with stools and a foldout table. Outside there was a bench where I could stretch out and snooze in the noonday sun, a Stetson pulled low over my eyes, fast asleep and fully alert in the manner of all bona fide sons of the saddle. My hand was never far from a holstered silver Colt, which hung on a hook by the door, awaiting the day when I was big enough to have the belt fit snugly around my hips and not slip towards my ankles with every manly stride. A sign nailed above the door said 'DCM Ranch' – for David, Claire and Michael. We used to tie the ponies to a hitching rail outside and there is a photograph somewhere of two trail-weary cowboys and an Indian (Claire, of course – I used to think all Indians were girls because they had long black hair and made high-pitched whooping sounds when they swarmed down off the mesa to terrorise the wagon trains) standing with the DCM in the background, all squinty smiles and sunshine.

Claire, in fact, used to swarm off the hills quite often, bareback Apache-style on Pinky, a little walleyed skewbald who looked the part and could be trusted not to do anything unpredictable. Murmuring endearments to Pinky and annoyingly detached from – possibly even unaware of – the unfolding drama in which she would be expected to play a central role, she would set out on an eccentric and prolonged circumambulation of the chicken house, sometimes disappearing for minutes at a time on the other side of the rhododendrons, no doubt

to regroup, while David and I grabbed our guns and took cover inside. A little unnerved, we would wait there in silent anticipation, straining to catch the first tentative war-whoops which we secretly hoped would build to a terrifying crescendo as the enemy came closer. A sliding wooden trap door low down in the back wall, access for bantams in a former life, provided a vantage point from which I could deliver an inexhaustible hail of lead with my six-shooter at relatively close range, and every few minutes, as Claire wandered recklessly into my field of view, I had just moments in which to pick her off one by one, until eventually she alone was left standing. The battle over, if we ragged survivors were in bad humour, she could expect to be summarily scalped, and Pinky claimed as spoils of war. Otherwise, stripped of weapons and dignity, she would be forced at gunpoint to make tea at the foldout table; something from which, it always irked us to discover, she seemed to take a perverse pleasure, laying out cups, saucers and milk jug just so and inviting us to sit quietly on the stools while the tea infused to her satisfaction.

The others, as you would expect, grew tired of cowboy ways, but a little spark had been planted in my subconscious, which life's opportunities have occasionally fanned into flame. The chicken house of my childhood lived again on thirty thousand acres west of the Rockies, in the shape of a bunkhouse shared with two born-again Blackfoot cowboys named Louis 'Denver Colorado' Holmes and Gerry Macaulay. Seduced there by an image of the Old West whose modern equivalent, I was thrilled to discover, is still a way of life, I built a west of my own in that back lane in Edinburgh. And best of all, during ten years of commuting six days a week to work in the city, I got to escape every night along the valley, down the lane, through the courtyard and into our own Quilchena, Quilchena the home ranch, our very own piece of New Mexico and the only slate-roofed, sandstone-built Santa Fe-style farmhouse east of, well, Santa Fe probably.

So all things considered, leaving the house on that October morning was not part of our life plan. In fact, life plans were on hold for the moment. One thing, however, we did know: we would spend the next few months licking our wounds and taking stock in a very different place. If we thought Quilchena was isolated, try an island on an Irish sea lough with only a wooden cabin and no mains electricity. Try oilskins, sea boots and two small boats just to get to the supermarket.