Wide Eyed
Ruaridh Nicoll

Chapter 1

SUNDAY

High tide: 00.45 (full moon), 13.00 Light south-westerly

I can walk through the shadows of my memories and feel nothing. Here in the garden I am tall, straight-backed, strolling like a gentleman. The reflecting sea spreads away to the horizon, offering a route out for the souls, while on the landward side, a thick forest blocks any way back. Shrubs and small trees, tilted by the southwesterlies, break up the sadness and protect the stones. Built into the wall is a granite temple to the memories of the Regos, reduced to the size of a cabin but still intimidating. The door has a small round hole at its centre. At the gate is Betsy's memorial, that lovely name Gillander. The boy has no place, having been lost, but I find I can never look for long; my eyes are always drawn towards the top wall, to a memory in the shadows. That one is mine. It is not that I fear it – I haven't felt such a thing for a long time – but I know respect. The moment will come and that is how it should be. I enjoy it here. Few visit, it is so hard to find. It is fresh in the garden, and I am so used to the forest, to the endless sound of dripping . . .

At the end of the promontory, with her fiancé crouched among the shards at her knee, Betsy Gillander looked out over the winter sea. 'Five kingdoms,' he had said. She counted, her gaze swinging across the dark landmasses that lingered at the edge of sight. The departing water reflected light back at her, the falling sun burning across its surface. She looked down. 'England,' she recited. 'The Isle of Man, Ireland.'

He picked up a small stone, black and sharp, showing it to her.

'Scotland?'

He smiled and shifted the stone in his palm, holding it so that his index finger could point towards the sky. The sea moved beyond him, drawn towards the slim channel through which it would rush out into the Atlantic.

Betsy shrugged.

'The Kingdom of Heaven,' he said. 'It was here, right here, where I decided to marry you.'

She had known that. She had been aware of the resonance as he had led her along the path. The proposal, which had come several weeks before, had already created a place for itself in her memory, in one of those galleries where the unforgettable lie. He had been in bed, she about to leave for work. 'You were thinking of heaven?' she asked now.

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'Perhaps. Why not?'

'Heavens to Betsy.' The words had gone before she realized the tone wasn't quite warm enough. She addeda smile and put down a hand to push back hair fromhis ears. She could feel her life, the old life, move awaywith the vast waters. Despite its blinding fall, the sunoffered no heat and she shivered. 'Your knees will be sore,' she said.

His face shadowed as he rose, the sun behind him. 'We'll go in.'

'It's beautiful.' She had irritated him, and now tried to recover. 'It was a beautiful place to think of me.'

There was only room for one to stand in the surge of rock that formed this outward tip, and now he hung above her. 'This is what we came for,' he said. 'This is what you wanted to see.' He eased his way across the granite, climbing down into a flotsam-filled gully, then up towards the machair.

Betsy stood, blood seeping back into the places where the uneven rocks had pressed against her, a stiffness in her muscles. She had been deserted by her skill for saying the right things, the words that would keep him calm. He had mistaken her distrust of sentimentalism for callousness. The truth was that she felt removed, protected, despite the sucking of water in the crevices below. She felt at the edge of countries and her life.

She caught up with him at the top of the headland, and they paused at the base of a white, crenellated coastguard station that commanded a view of the firth. The village and the harbour lay below them, already making permanent patterns in Betsy's mind. She knew she was shifting his proposal to this place, combining the memories to exclude the image of him lying there in bed, her decision, as she accepted, whether or not to go to work. She was placing him in this tableau, with its perfect distance. Farmland rolled in from the north, then fell away to the east and west in mussel-stained shores. Distances were marked by the occasional homestead caught at points where wandering dykes converged. Trees were rare, huddling where the land fell out of the prevailing wind, and among them, small groups of sheltering cattle. The harbour was ringed by houses, wilfully independent in their design yet crouched together against a vast sky that seemed to stretch wider than was possible in this world. Apart from tenuous trails of smoke, the only movement came from the harbour. A fishing-boat was preparing to leave, while sailboats shivered on the falling tide, masts exaggerating their movements.

Betsy took her fiancé's hand, glad when he chose to accept it.

'You wanted to see,' he said.

'It's a beautiful place, it couldn't be lovelier.'

'I wanted you to see the place behind the thought.'

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They walked down on to the pier. The fishing-boat rode high on the outgoing tide, the young crew passing supplies from the dockside, which were then carried down into the depths of the boat. The captain, squat and broad-shouldered in the way of the people in these parts but with clear features and white hair cut close, rested his back against the wheelhouse, talking to a man on the dockside, saying they would steam to the south-west. Betsy slowed to watch, her feeling of separateness still on her. The man on the dock was in profile and, in her mood, Betsy was caught by the cast of his face, with its long bones, the flat forehead leading straight to the tip of his nose. He had a thick mass of grey-black hair that fell back behind his ears to his neck, and shifted on his feet as he argued about some piece of equipment the captain wanted.

'Complaints,' he was saying. 'All I do is pamper you and what do I get in return? Nothing. Nada.'

'He's going foreign on us, boys,' the captain said. 'You're as generous as a Peterhead whore, Rego, and about as attractive.'

The crew whooped, and the man on the dock, who Betsy presumed was the owner, offered a soft, thoughtful smile. 'Boys, you'll understand how your skipper knows so much about the Peterhead hairies? He came across one and asked her how much. She says, "Thirty quid," and he says, "Nah, too expensive, how much for a wank?" and she says, "'Tis thirty quid whatever ye are."' The crew, who had stopped to listen, cracked up, looking across at their captain.

'Don't listen to the dago, my love,' he said, and hopped on to the pier to kiss a tall, slight woman who had wandered up while the owner was telling his story. Dressed incongruously in summer colours, she offered an innocent smile to the captain as he put an arm round her. The man who had told the story grimaced at the restof the crew and made a comic show of scuttling away.

One of the younger crewmen noticed Betsy watching and shouted up: 'You want to come to sea with us, love?'

Shocked out of the bubble in which she had enclosed herself, Betsy shook her head and laughed, as her fiancé pulled her hand in the direction of the inn. They walked away but stopped to look round when the owner shouted, 'Where's Priest? Priest!' An enormous man, round and bald but for a stripe of wiry hair around a swollen head, emerged from the wheelhouse in torn and filthy overalls, then scrambled up the side of the pier. He looked directly at Betsy, offering an empty stare that, even from such a distance, caused her to take a step backwards. She turned again and walked quickly towards the inn. 'For Christ's sake, come on,' she heard the man called Rego say behind her.

Betsy led the way through the empty reception area, up the stairs and down a corridor to their room. She walked to the window, past the floral bed-cover, the biscuit-coloured kettle, an old television, across the mustard carpet. One of the boys

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was releasing the boat from its moorings, throwing ropes down on to the deck and jumping after them. The woman stood on the pier. Gulls lifted off yachts as the black and red hull swung out and past them. 'That boat's leaving,' Betsy said, as her fiancé joined her at the window, standing close behind her.

'You could have been on it,' he said, reaching out to draw the curtains. 'They wanted you as their galley-girl.' He swung an arm under her and carried her to the bed.

Betsy woke to darkness. The memory of the large man climbing from the boat had followed her into sleep, his shadow scuttling up the harbour wall. She lay listening to the wind in the wires of the boats, then slipped from the bed to look out into the night. The weather had turned and a light snow swept across the sailboats that had grounded on the low-tide mud, yellow under the pier lamps. Unsure of the time, and needing comfort, she placed her hands on the glass, moving close to the pane so that she could see up the street to the harbour-master's office. The glass fogged, and in the mist she imagined her fiancé at work on the advertising campaign that had led to his discovering the village two months before. The building had been repainted and her eyes wandered from its glistening walls to the dark houses across the bay. These were memories chosen for her by him.

A draught negotiated the window's seal, and its chill sent her back to bed. She sought her fiancé in the covers, whispering in his ear until he murmured and enclosed her in his arms. When she woke again, he was standing at the window and she could hear sleet hitting the glass andthe low whine of the wind. She crawled over to lie in the warmth of his departed body, seeking his scent before asking how the world outside looked.

'Dark,' he said, opening the curtain and showing her the sky: dawn had arrived, but little light with it. 'I don't think we'll be doing any walking.'

'Why would we want to?' Betsy moved deeper under the covers but he remained where he was and she sensed a slight disappointment in him. 'We'll find your cave tomorrow,' she said. 'This feels like an important day, our day. Let's spend it in bed.'

Her fiancé rapped his knuckles on the glass, then dropped back in beside her, Betsy moving towards him, coaxing him into making love. Later she rested her head on his chest, and looked out through the crack in the curtains while he fell into a gentle sleep, his breathing slow and, for once, untroubled. Listening to his heart, Betsy wondered how they would age. She liked his body, the way it fitted together, how he presented it when he spoke and his ease within it. In time she had grown used to the moisture of the skin, his captured breaths, the murmur of his thoughts in sleep. She would complain only when his restlessness woke her and he would reply by disparaging her quiet rhythms, her natural contentment, her restfulness.

They had met nearly eight years before, the memory causing her, as always, a stab of embarrassment. He had possessed a confidence, a self-assurance, that allowed him to use his insouciant wit to clever and cutting effect, consuming her twenty-year-old

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mind. Silenced by nerves, she had sought a voice in drink and ended up sleeping with his housemate, humiliated when the man she really wanted came into the bedroom the next morning to watch the only television in the flat. Betsy now ran a fingertip across his belly, prompting a distant complaint. Of course, she had discovered that the self-assurance covered insecurities, the wit a streak of cruelty. These things had revealed themselves during those first years, yet there was much to love, not least his imagination and intelligence. She had laboured to get a good degree while he performed effortlessly. She had never questioned her desire to be liked, it seemed so natural, so she tried to make herself pleasing to him. Even after all these years his proposal, in some ways, had felt like a triumph. She allowed her fingers to run down past his belly button and into the hair below. Keeping her fingertips peripheral, she circled skin so sensitive that he stirred.

'Engaged couples have more sex than at any other time of their life,' she whispered.

'Let me recover.' He sighed, grumpily turning away so that she was forced to move.

She wriggled up behind him, leaning forward so that her mouth was by his ear. 'Now is no time for sleep,' she whispered, and goosed him.

With the weather closing in, they remained in their room, eating snacks they had brought with them or found in the complimentary basket beside the kettle. Occasionally Betsy's fiancé would stand and look out over the harbour, rain pushing past in the half-light, the atmosphere viscous with cold. They talked of the filming that had brought him here, of the advertisement he had written. Or of the other interests the area held, of the ancient religions that had touched this peninsula in the first days of wandering Christianity. Mainly they lay in bed, making the most of enforced idleness. Come evening, they went down to the bar for dinner. The storm was forcing the Irish Sea up the pier-wall, sleet and snow sweeping across the bay, andthe rigging of the sailboats giving off a constant, background howl.

'Nasty evening,' Betsy said to the landlady.

'Very,' she answered, unsmiling. 'What can I get you?'

Betsy felt a sudden urge to force out the melancholy that had been dogging them. 'Champagne.' She turned to her fiancé, who looked uncomfortable. 'We should drink champagne.' The counter formed a circular island between two rooms, the public bar only feet away. The two men who were sitting there had stopped talking to watch her while the landlady glanced down to a glass-fronted refrigerator.

'We have Moët.' She looked up. 'You're celebrating?'

Betsy nodded. 'This is the creative young man who wrote that TV ad they filmed down here a couple of months ago. It's being shown for the first time tonight.'

'I thought I recognized you,' the landlady said, but the chill was still there.

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'And it was here that he decided to marry me.'

She was a stout woman, who looked to be in her fifties. Finally she offered warm eyes but little more. 'Good for you.' She bent down to pick up the bottle. 'I'll bring this over.'

They sat in the corner, looking out into the gale. Betsy took her fiancé's hand, squeezing as the landlady arrived with the champagne, watching as she opened the bottle and poured a glass for each of them. A man came through the door of the lounge bar, soaking and whey-faced, and finding only them went back out and into the public bar. They offered the landlady a glass and, when she declined, ordered food, watching her pad away into the kitchen. When she returned to the bar, she leaned over to talk in a whisper to those who sat on the other side.

The fiancé checked the slim watch that had been a gift from Betsy. 'Forty minutes,' he said. 'There's a TV on the wall of the public bar. They'll want to see it, don't you think?'

'Of course.'

'She didn't ask.'

'They'll want to see it, I'm certain.'

Their dinner arrived. Her fiancé's nervousness grew, and Betsy reassured him. He said it was his chance, that if he really was to make it as a freelancer, and not have to get a full-time job, the success of this slot was crucial. Betsy knew the territory well and quietly built up his confidence so that when the time came he surged through the two doors that led into the public bar. It was a bleaker room, the surfaces washable except for the worn green felt on the pool table. The men turned, their eyes weary, expressions distant but not unfriendly. They shifted so that he could reach the bar and talk to the landlady. 'That ad,' he said. 'It's on in a couple of minutes. On ITV. Perhaps we could see it?'

The landlady looked along the bar. 'Why not?' she said, reaching for a remote. Sound emerged from the box before the picture, Jon Snow talking: 'If disease is suspected, will the government be placing restrictions on the movement of livestock?' There was no answer – the landlady had flicked over.

'That's all we need,' said one of the men. 'A bloody plague.' Betsy saw his hands on the bar: big, dirty, bruised but elegant.

The ads started running, the first for a mobile phone, while in the bar the door opened and a man came in, shaking the sleet from his receding grey hair. There was a muttering of welcomes, his name Bunbury. 'Any news?' he asked.

The landlady shook her head as she placed a glass under the tap. Betsy's fiancé looked impatient as Bunbury shrugged out of the jacket that covered his lean body. His right arm was in a sling, the ruined hand – black and crushed – visible beyond it.

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'Lucky I'm left-handed,' he said, catching her gaze.

Betsy smiled, reacting uncomfortably to the faintly sour presence of the man, his eyes too close together. Her fiancé hissed. Pictures of an urban street party being broken up by the police flashed up, then cars driving along rainswept country roads until they reached a village, this village, music erupting over the harbour. The texture of the film was rich, velvety and dark, youths writhing, storm-water everywhere, and a couple breaking away, along the deserted street, to where the boy pushed the girl against the harbour-master's wall, the camera pulling away to show a dark bottle painted up the entire reach of the building, the legend 'Any SPort In A Storm' in block letters beside it. As the ad finished her fiancé waited for applause, but the men at the bar sought out their drinks. 'Christ,' said the man with big hands.

The landlady switched off the television and gestured Betsy through to the other bar. There was no sound but the wind and the clatter of cleats in the rigging beyond the window panes. Betsy took her fiancé's hand and had to pull a little, breaking through his mortification, leading him away, an under-the-breath muttering rising from the men they left behind.

The landlady waited on the other side. 'Don't take it personally,' she said. 'The storm. We've got a boat out in it.' She was speaking quietly, earnestly. 'We can't contact them.' She looked at one, then the other with clear eyes and went back to her other customers.

Betsy gazed at her champagne glass, until her attention was caught by the crippled man pulling a canvas slip from under his ruined arm. He unrolled it on the bar to reveal several long knives, one of which the landlady lifted to test the edge. 'One of your specials, this one,' she said. 'How much do I owe you?'

Betsy sipped at her drink.

'They hated it,' her fiancé said, and walked away.

Betsy sat on the bed, back against the padded headboard, watching her fiancé read. He was sitting on a hard chair by the window, pretending to be lost in his book. As he flipped each page his hand occasionally moved up to mark a paragraph. 'It wasn't your fault,' she said.

He turned another page and she sighed, reaching over to pick up her novel.

'You're right,' he said. 'It wasn't. You talked me into it.' Dark eyes had rolled up towards her; his face had soured. The reassurance Betsy had offered during dinner had been repackaged into the cause of this downfall, and the wrong now lay with her.

'No one thought anything bad of you,' she said. 'It's the storm. They have friends who are out there, in danger.' She pointed to the window, and her attention was

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momentarily caught by the violence of the weather. The sailboats were lost in the driving sleet, but she could still hear them, hysterical in the darkness. She wondered if those in danger were the boys she had seen the day before, and felt fear for them. 'Any port in a storm,' she said. 'I mean . . .'

'I'd have thought it was perfect.' He was speaking from behind his book.

'They don't blame you.'

He put the book down. 'Everything I do goes wrong.' He spoke softly but Betsy recognized the tone. It emerged from a pool of resentment he held inside, which she always managed to forget was there, and which was fed by her paying the mortgage and his credit-card bills. 'I get a break, it turns sour. Nothing works out. My reward is your sympathy. This wouldn't have happened to you.' She waited, attempting to draw the sting with silence, his sharpness showing he was annoyed by it. 'I'm sorry if it pisses me off sometimes.' He picked up his book again.

'Can't we try to have a nice time?' Betsy asked. 'Please?'

'It was you who wanted to come here.'

A memory triggered as Betsy watched him – perhaps it was the awfulness of the marketing book he was reading: she recalled their university days, her struggle to complete the Ph.D. She had treated the idea of marriage with disdain then, proud of a life she believed richer and more textured than those led by others, and one that had ultimately resulted in an affair apiece. Hers had been a response to his infidelity. She had spent a night with her boss, a scientist she admired. She was aware that her temperament was naturally staid – she had been told so often enough – and that he added eccentricities.

'The Art of Positive Thinking.' She read out the book title.

He would usually respond to this by saying that only the unimaginative needed novels, talk of Madame Bovary – one of only three that he had ever finished – as 'fantasy for cattle', but he clearly wasn't in the mood. He told her to fuck off.

Betsy wasn't offended: the insult was a commonplace. Still caught up in her memories, she laughed at the conceit of her early twenties. Now there was no one left to justify herself to. The group of friends from their days at university had dispersed, mostly to London, but even those who had skipped over to Glasgow were now strangers, and the traffic never came the other way. She wondered now if his eccentricity was the excuse she had used for wanting stability in this part of her life, his trickiness counterbalancing the prospect of marriage. A certain seriousness had crept into their relationship, and now that there were just the two of them she felt she wanted its security. She yearned for a time when their days were no longer a battle of wills. She supposed she wanted to relax.

He had not lifted his eyes from the book, so Betsy slipped off the bed and walked to the window, putting a hand on the glass, feeling it bulge under the assault of the

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storm. Wet snow coagulated on the outer side, then slipped along the surface, pushed by the wind. At the pier, detonations caused by repelled waves shook the navigation lights, great towers of whitewater catching the wind to be thrown across the harbour in a rush. The sailboats, the tide now almost in, strained at their tethers, backing away from the sea. A car's headlights showed from among the houses. The sleet had turned the land a dismal white and, as Betsy watched, the car rolled slowly from one street-lamp to the next, headlights picking out the church and the line of houses leading to the pub before swinging out over the water and dying there. A wave hit the pier, the water rose and arced over to ratchet downon the car's roof. When the internal light came on, Betsy saw the occupant reach into the back seat, an arm and the top of a pale-crowned head showing through the sunroof. The light went out as the next wave fell, and as the water ran off the car, the driver's door opened, a man struggled out and ran for the pub.

'Another guest,' said Betsy, drawing the curtains. Her fiancé failed to reply so she pushed aside his book and lowered herself on to his knee. His eyes rose as she leaned down to kiss him. 'I'm sorry that it didn't go as you planned. The ad was great, really great. It'll be a massive success, sell crates of that vile drink.' She pulled back. 'The timing was just bad luck. A pity, that's all. But it won't make any difference. This is our time, and we should enjoy it.'

He looked over at the curtains. 'You'd think they'd know what they're doing,' he said. 'Even in weather like this.'

She put a hand to his face, bringing him back, gently kissing him until steps sounded in the corridor.

'You're a brave man,' they heard the landlady say, as she walked.

'Stupid.' The new voice was English, the words exact, clipped at each end. 'Last hour trouble. Knew . . . didn't make it tonight . . . might take days.' The footsteps stopped outside the neighbouring room.

'Well, here you are. It's the only other room that looks out over the front but' – the landlady failed to lower her voice, keeping it matter-of-fact – 'you've got an engaged couple next door so if tomorrow you want one of the back rooms just let me know.' They heard the door open. 'Will this do?' He must have said yes because the key changed hands. 'Okay. Well, goodnight, Mr Boyle.'

As the footsteps faded, they could hear the man moving around his room. Betsy looked at her fiancé. 'I think we've been set a challenge,' she said.

* * *

Betsy stirred, her eyes opening to the miserable light of a bedside lamp in the pre-dawn. Her fiancé was sitting up, looking towards the night and the storm it contained. She reached across to him. 'What is it?'

'I think it's going to give.'

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For a moment she thought he meant the weather, but beyond the curtains, the window shuddered and thumped in its mounting. She sat up. ‘Go and look,’ she said.

He pulled himself from the bed, approached the curtains from the side and slid one open. Beyond,the darkness seemed thick, a black sky rolling past, and then, in an instant, hazing white into a blizzard. A strong gust hit the building and the glass crunched, tailing away as a hiss of air pushed through. The bulb flickered and then they were in darkness.

Betsy reached for the lamp and, when she found it, flicked the switch.

‘No point,’ her fiancé said, from the darkness. ‘There’s no lights showing at all, anywhere.’ The square of window gradually asserted itself, what little luminosity the night held revealing itself now that the electricity had failed. A burst of white light startled them as the moon showed for an instant between the charging clouds. ‘It’s mayhem out there,’ he said. ‘Boats are off their moorings. There’s snow everywhere.’

Betsy sought out her dressing-gown among the bedclothes then joined him at the window. She opened the other curtain, reaching out for it, careful not to stand in front of the bulging glass. Now that her eyes had adjusted, the weather took shape as it ground against itself, causing shadows in the atmosphere. It was only when the moonlight flared that a full image was revealed; two boats were on their sides. Another, the biggest of the yachts, had dragged itself towards land. Out in the darkness, the whitewater, wind and sleet met high above the pier, showing in thunderheads of phosphorescence. Another gust hit the glass, and Betsy moved to encircle her fiancé with her arms. A flash of moonlight lit the world and, for a moment, Betsy saw a car parked in danger, close to the last house before the pier, a dim light showing from within. Then the moonlight was gone and, shockingly, so was the scream of the storm. A long, rolling explosion of water hitting the pier took its place, whitewater rising.

The car door opened and, in the faint light, they saw a yellow-clad man step out and wedge himself against the side of the vehicle. The wind returned to crack and hiss at the window, sleet removing him from view. ‘It’s the fat man from the fishing-boat,’ Betsy said. She had recognized him instantly, the memory of his rise up the pier-side still troubling her. ‘They called him Priest.’

‘You can tell that?’ Her fiancé was warm under her hands.

‘That shape.’

The squall cleared, and in a brief glimpse of moonlight they saw the man running out along the pier, looping a rope over the stanchions he passed, the wind pulling at a large object he held in his spare hand. The light faded, but in the gloom the figure, now only a smear, appeared to be backing towards them. They heard the sea hit the harbour wall.

‘Jesus,’ exhaled the fiancé.

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'Maybe we should . . .' Moonlight opened out again, revealing the object the man had been struggling to carry as a child's dinghy, now in the water, his bulk within, legs absurdly splayed over each corner. The fluorescence of the boat and the yellow of his waterproofs became a blur in the darkness, and monochrome in moonlight. He was caught in an eddy, a flurry of snow fringing a curtain of water that arced over him, and then they saw him paddling, paying out the rope he still held until the wind caught him and sent him skidding across the water and back into the darkness, a mad pendulum of colour sliding across the boils. Neither Betsy nor her fiancé spoke: they waited for sight as wind, wave and sleet soared and doused him.

He showed again, hanging from the anchor chain of the prettiest yacht, the hull bucking above him. He disappeared and then reappeared, shockingly, in bright lights: the driver of the car had switched on his headlights, a beam that revealed the full weight of sea and storm crossing its path. Priest was tying the rope to the chain, the sea testing it at once. He lifted his paddle from where it was wedged between his upslung legs and his gut and paddled hard to avoid the yacht. The car swung round to roll beneath their window and Priest was gone, a smudge of colour sliding across the water to wash up on the battered land. The headlights had lost Betsy her night-vision, and she caught Priest's movements only when he opened the tailgate of the car, threw in the dinghy and rolled in behind it.

She and her fiancé didn't speak until the car had pulled out of sight. Then Betsy put her hand to the pane, felt it move and, as if challenged by Priest's bravery, pressed her cheek against it to see if anyone else had watched this performance. Nobody was out, but her gaze caught on the harbour-master's office, its walls seemingly discoloured, the white giving way to darker shapes below.

* * *

Come lunch, the lounge was empty, a single candle throwing yellow light from the corner of the bar, a chill hard in the room. 'Only sandwiches, I'm afraid,' said the landlady, who was fiddling with a radio.

Betsy said it was fine, and asked about the fishermen.

She told them that the boat's emergency beacon – it was the one they had seen leave, the Albatross – had started to transmit the day before but nothing more had been heard. She didn't seem inclined to discuss it further. 'Both the British and Irish coastguard are searching for the life-rafts, but with the telephone lines down there's no further news. I can't even pick up the radio.'

'We saw a man risk his life for a yacht last night. It—'

The landlady tapped her fingertips on the bar, interrupting Betsy. 'Let me get you those sandwiches.'

Betsy watched her walk through to the kitchen, then noticed her fiancé was already sitting at a table in the corner. 'Cold sandwiches,' he complained, as she joined him. 'And then? What shall we do afterwards?'

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'Perhaps we should go for a walk,' she replied, equally sarcastic. Beyond the windows the sky had closed in, curtains of sleet driving in across the harbour. She had tried to make the best of it. When they had wokenthat morning, within the warmth of the covers, shehad suggested they huddle against the cold. But he had fidgeted and complained and eventually gone to run a bath, furious when he discovered there was no hot water. Then he had dressed in all his clothes and sat gazing out into the storm. Despite the bad light, Betsy had eventually picked up her book, once in a while glancing up at the irritating man facing down the crunch of the glass in its mounts.

'I thought there might be something going on down here,' she said now.

'There's nothing going on.'

Betsy sat and waited for her food in silence. She tried to avoid feeling resentful, but her memory kept dropping pieces of evidence into her thoughts. It was true that she had wanted to see where he had decided to marry her, to celebrate the impulse rather than the drab delivery of the proposal, but now he was crushing this. She remembered the years when she had worked so hard, while he was out getting high. She would ask him to let her sleep before major exams and he would tell her she was dull, go out and bring back strangers who would play music through the night, often the same song over and over again. A different reaction was assured when success came her way and she wanted to drink and dance. He would refuse to emerge from his 'projects' and say she didn't understand his creativity. She recalled that, on those evenings, she would sit feeling as miserable as she did now.

'Why don't we ask if they have any board games?' she said, as the landlady emerged with the sandwiches. 'We could even ask if she would light the fire in the other bar. We could get drunk.'

Her fiancé was still looking out of the window as the landlady put down the plates, and Betsy was about to ask her when the front door opened and a man pushed his way into the public bar. He looked over the countertops and was about to head their way, but the landlady held up her hand and went to join him.

'Fuckin' nightmare.' The man spoke loudly, deafened by the storm. 'I went right up to the point, landedon my arse a couple of times, and near went over thewall. Got a signal, but I couldn't hear a thing. Nouse. I reckon the mobile's fucked as well now.'

The landlady poured him a glass of whisky. He looked at it guiltily for an instant, then swallowed it in one go. His eyes focused briefly on Betsy and her fiancé, and his voice dropped. 'There's a wall over the road and it's too difficult to clear while the wind's running . . .'

'I think that's a good idea of yours,' said Betsy's fiancé. 'Let's get a fire going in there and play Ker-plunk.'

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They ended up back in the bedroom, where the sound of the window grinding in its setting found open nerves in Betsy's temples. It didn't take long for a row to start. Even in the calm of everyday life, the mundane triggered arguments between them. Now Betsy's fiancé was explaining why he thought her practicality was useless in this crisis. In the usual way, point-scoring turned the bland acidic, and she was soon being reminded of how insipid yet dangerous her lack of imagination could be. This expanded into what bad company she was. Betsy tried to keep her voice down as the quarrel developed: she had heard their neighbour shift on his bed in the next room. She even tried to go along the corridor to a small room set aside for residents, but its small window gave little light and it was bitterly cold, reminding Betsy of a sitting room at an old people's home. When she returned to the bedroom, her fiancé said, 'You can't leave it, can you? You have to have the last word.'

Betsy chose not to reply. Fully dressed, she slipped under the covers and tried to sleep, but without success.

That evening, amazingly, the atmosphere in the bar had worsened, following the storm down into its bleak depression. The landlady watched Betsy's fiancé turn off the torch she had loaned them, and apologized that, once again, only sandwiches were on offer. 'You put out the candle in the room?' she asked. Betsy reassured her and was about to say more, but the storm let loose a long howl, distant and melancholic, and they all turned to look towards the curtained windows. 'You should go through to the public bar where it's warm,' the landlady said. 'I'll bring you those sandwiches.' Beyond the two counters a fire burned strongly in the grate, but the faces of the men who stood there robbed it of any joy.

It took nerve to face the public bar again, and Betsy had to set herself against the force of her discomfort to make it through the two doors, the night screaming at them in the gap between. The men clustered at the counter, their talk low and their hands full of weary gestures.

Having picked up their drinks, Betsy and her fiancé sat in the corner, not far from the fire. 'If we can, we should try to leave tomorrow,' Betsy said. Apart from their agreement to eat, those were the first words either had said for four hours.

The landlady passed a plate and a candle over the bar to a man, who brought them over. 'Storm rations,' he said. Betsy replied with a sad smile and watched as he returned to his drink. The men who stood there seemed powerless, and she realized that they must be at the periphery of events: men who would take any risk to save strangers were now impotent to help their friends. They shifted uneasily, muttering the occasional platitude. 'Willie's a good captain,' said one. 'He's got to get them out of there.' Betsy had never had a view of tragedy before and it allowed her mind to wander from her own misery.

They finished the sandwiches and Betsy took the plate to the bar. She brought back another drink for her fiancé.

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'You're not having one?' he asked.

'I don't feel like it.' A man came in from the night, beating his hat against his leg to get the rain off, nodding to them as he left his coat near the fire. Betsy noticed that the others watched him hopefully, recomposing themselves when they saw there was no news.

'I thought you wanted to get drunk.'

'That was earlier. I'm happy with this.' She lifted her soft drink.

'You won't even drink with me.' He said this softly, a murmur in her ear.

Betsy couldn't bear to get drunk with such fear around her, but all she said was, 'I just don't want to.'

'You're worried about them.' He leaned back into the fake leather, his voice still deathly quiet, barely audible above the storm. 'We can't do anything that will make them feel better. And here we are, stuck. Engaged. Together.' They sat in silence. 'Why did you say yes, by the way?' he asked finally. 'You always laughed at the idea of marriage.'

'Love.'

'Oh.' He took a moment to think. 'I wondered if it was charity.' Another pause. 'But, then, you've always confused the two.' The door in the lounge bar opened and their fellow guest emerged. He spoke to the landlady, all the while taking in the two rooms by degrees, like a nervous heron. In the candlelight his head looked delicate and he carried it on a long, thin neck. His hair had receded, increasing the sense that he could be easily damaged. The landlady pointed and he came through the doors that led to the public bar, greeting the men, and smiling when he saw Betsy and her fiancé. He had high cheekbones and prominent eyebrows, to the pointwhere pupils and irises were lost in the shadows of his face.

'Another of the stranded,' Betsy said.

He grimaced, and she felt his gaze, all but hidden, take her in and move to her companion. The scrutiny passed quickly. 'Not nice,' he said, looking towards the curtained windows. He returned Betsy's smile and the delicacy in his features fell away. 'You the honeymooners?'

'Not yet.'

He nodded, not seeming to hear. He moved towards the bar, asking the landlady where he should sit. She pointed to a table on the other side of the fire, and he looked back. 'Won't disturb you, then,' he said.

Betsy watched as he walked to the seat, pushing himself into the corner where two benches met. He was wearing a well-cut but aged black suit with an open-necked

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shirt. Very tall, he wrapped himself up, one ankle pulled above the other knee. He retrieved a torn khaki paperback from his pocket, holding it at a distance so that it caught the candlelight. It took a while for Betsy to realize he wasn't reading but returning her gaze. She blushed and he grinned, once again losing that peculiar air of fragility.

Betsy turned back to her fiancé. 'Did you really think I'd say no?' She recalled being happy as she walked to work that day. Edinburgh's air had tasted somehow fresher than normal, fizzing in her lungs.

'No. In truth I knew you'd say yes.'

Betsy just stared at her hands. Finally she said she was going back upstairs. Her fiancé shrugged: he would join her later.

That night the storm grew into a hurricane, snow turning to sleet and then to water, coming out of the west as a deluge. Betsy approached the window tentatively and heard houses being stripped, the wind gripping at overlaps and gaps, using the leverage to tear in. She lay on the bed in the dark, wrapped in the red coat she loved, and listened to the fury. She only moved when a series of savage blasts penetrated the storm's howls. Then she went to the window. No moon showed. Only the whitewater, reaching skywards at the harbour wall, created an impression of light in the absolute darkness, suggesting an unseen wave rushing in to obliterate everything. People emerged from the pub and a car's headlights sent out a beam across the harbour, penetrating the driven sea and rain. The lights swung towards the land, and there was the yacht that Priest had risked his life to protect. It had broken its rope and was on its side, grinding against the sea wall that enclosed the church's whitewashed bulwark in the harbour. Betsy felt a terrible sadness.

Her fiancé knocked on the door, asking resentfully to be let in. They did not make love that night; they barely talked. For much of the time they sat in silence until he fell asleep. Unable to follow, Betsy rested against the headboard, candle out, tempest to the right of her, troubled breathing to the left. She was thinking back to why she had said yes that morning in the flat, despite her disappointment at being asked in that way. She wondered if he was right when he said she always confused love with charity.

For the next eight hours she sat in the same place, thinking over their life together. Despite her exhaustion, despite even the tears the worst memories mined, she felt clear-sighted for the first time. She rested there, feeling the empty misery open up inside her as she looked closely at the course of their relationship. For eight hours she searched for the light in eight years but little penetrated the pain, darkness sucking away any laughter they had shared. By the time he stirred, she had made a decision to leave him, and as he sat up and focused, she acted on her conviction. She didn't care about the neighbour, she didn't care about anything but finishing this thing now. 'I'm not marrying you,' she said, as he struggled from sleep. 'It's over.'

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