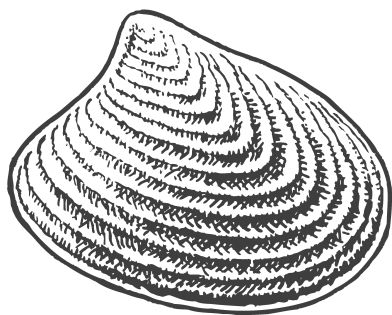


Notebook I

1891-1905

# WATER





*That boy, Brukie's Sandy, he was a one for plucking the world from the sea. Driftwood, rope, slimy knots of net and weed, bonxie feathers, odd leather slippers, bits of wool, salt sacks, mittens, wax paper, eggshells, Dutchmen's caps, syrup tins, skeleton fish, the beaks and broken wings of gulls. Once, he scooped from the swell a hank of long yellow hair with the skin still upon it. Gave them gooseflesh, it did, those hard, tough fishermen, but the boy stashed it away in his bundle like it was worth something.*

*And once, Jeemsie had to stop him from pulling aboard a half firkin of sodden grain wriggling with rats. 'Ye gaakie lad!' the old man cried. 'What have I told ye about the long-tailed fellers on the Lily Maud!' The kick of Jeemsie's seaboot busted up the rotting staves and flung the lot into the foam. And that boy, that Brukie's Sandy, he hung his sorry head, for he knew as well as any there were things a fisherman should never even say, let alone bring aboard a boat. But still he kept his eyes on the sea, for what it would toss up next.*

*So there was none surprised at how it happened. Aye, none at all.*



April 1972

Do you remember when you were a wee thing, lambsie, and you begged for a story, a story true? Funny bairn you were, never wanting ‘Cinderella’ or ‘The Three Bears’, oh no, not you. You always wanted your grunnie to tell you about Fish Meggie, the Gutting Girl from the Top of the World, and at the end I would have to cross my heart and say, *And it happened so, true as the puffin flies or the sealie sings or my name’s not Margaret Duthie Tulloch*. Years it was, lambsie, before you guessed that Fish Meggie was me.

I promised, didn’t I, that I would write the stories down for you one day. You were right to be impatient, lambsie, you were right to roll your pretty eyes. *One day* is what mothers tell daughters, and daughters tell their daughters, and it just never gets to be one day.

But I have been to town, lambsie—given your mother the slip—and I’ve bought myself this case of pens, blue and red and green, these books of lined paper, fresh and white. I have things to tell you before they take me off to one of those places where people put their bloomers on their heads and you have to eat blancmange whether you like it or not.

It won't be what you're expecting, not the fairytales of Fish Meggie you used to love. Even if I could remember exactly how I used to tell them, they wouldn't sound the same, now you are no longer a wee thing and no longer begging for stories. And I *canna* remember them exactly, no. I used to make things up, hither and thither, or turn the details upside down, just to keep the smile on your face. I know there is much I left out. We don't tell children how sad the world can be.

Aye, and there are things I've never told anyone. Some things are not spoken of even when they are happening, and as the years go by it's like the words that might explain them have been taken by the tide.

I am past eighty now, and I have done a fine job of forgetting a good many things in my life. But when I look at you, lambsie, nearly twenty-one and thinking there's nothing of value you don't already know, I am ashamed of myself. You don't know who you are until you know where you've come from. Even when ... Ah, well. Even when.

So I will write my story, if I can find the words. I will pull the pictures from my memory and try.

I am seeing with the eye of a bird. There's a coastline, there are canvas sails, wee boats painted blue. Coming in closer, the boatie shore, the long stony sweep of it, and the soles of my feet are tingling. Everywhere, skinny children, barefoot on the shingle. I am blown from the shore, up the slope to a grid of four streets. Tiller Street—my street—crosses through them, rows of stone houses with their backs to the North Sea. The wind is

## WATER

a howl the likes of which I have never heard since. And in the air, a sea tang, fresh and sharp and rotten all at once, spiced up with old bait, fish guts, plumes from chimneys where the fish are hung to dry and smoke. I can see the stiff striped aprons of the women, the wifies. My mother's face.

If I spoke these words to you now, lambsie, they would sound shivery-strange, all shirred up on invisible threads, clipped of the Aussie vowels my voice began to grow when I came down here to this place from the top of the world. My ink is turning to water, briny and blue. I look at her, that girl I was, at all those people with her, and I see how easily it breaks, my will to walk away from them lean and free. Because when it comes to family, you can walk from the top of the world to the bottom and still not be free.

I will write them down, lambsie, the things I remember, and the things I have tried to forget. I will take my time, my own roundabout way, but I will do my best for you. It's your story, too, whether you like it or not.

*And it happened so, true as the puffin flies or the sealie sings or my name's not Margaret Duthie Tulloch*—no, I canna promise you that this time, lambsie. I've learned some things, see, and one of them is this: there's no-one can tell a story true.



I was born in a village as far north-east as you can go on the Scottish mainland, closer to Norway than London. Roanhaven was only two miles from the town of Gadlehead, and I'm told they're all the one place now. But back then, oh, we were a folk apart, we thought Gadlehead as much a stranger-place as Fraserburgh to the north, Collieston to the south, and all those inland villages where Ma would sell fish from the creel on her back.

Our house was a but-and-ben—a wee two-room cottage, that is—like the others in Tiller Street, squat and polished smooth by the wind. That wind! Ach, a force, it was, a furious spinning of salt and grit and sleet sucked up from icefloes, ashpits, the spume of the ocean. It could scour the hairs off your arms, freeze the mud on your boots. Every year it took a little more of the houses in Tiller Street, wearing them away grain by grain. Not the frames, no, for the pink granite of Gadlehead will survive more generations than ever I'll know, but the soft matter between that yields to the elements.

I was the youngest at number 8 Tiller Street. The others—well, there was Da and Ma, Granda Jeemsie, my brothers, Archie, Jamie and Will, and my sister, Kitt.



If you had asked Granda, Da or Ma which of them was head of the household, each would have owned the name and looked at you as though it was the feeblest of questions, too plain to need an answer. Although my mother would not have been telling you this in words. No, Ma had Looks for that.

In the smallest but-and-ben in Tiller Street were Da's sister Unty Jinna, and her daughter, Liza. And next to us, Sailor Wattie, who had his own boat and a share in ours, the *Lily Maud*, Ma's sister Unty Leebie, and their children, Andrew and Elspet. Liza, Elspet and I were about the same age, so it was like having two more sisters. They could never come close to Kitta in my heart, though. No-one could.

We were sea people. We lived by its moods and rhythms as much as the fish and birds that were part of the order of things. From the time we could stumble along the boatie shore on our own feet, we'd be working—collecting whelks and limpets for bait, pitching stones at gulls pecking at the fish on our mothers' drying racks. Later, boys were expected to go to sea on the family boat or a neighbour's, while girls were put to service in the large estates thereabouts, or married young to another fisher family and made useful that way. *A fisher canna be in want of a wife*—that was the common wisdom and no-one quarrelled with it back then. When we children stood with our bare toes in the icy sand, gazing out to sea, I fancied there was freedom in what Archie, Jamie and Will saw, a ticket to the wide world, beyond the life I would know. To catch a glimpse

of my future, I'd to turn in the other direction, to the land. There I would see the labour of the mending sheds, the worn tracks between the peat country and our fireplaces. Tubs of grey, soapy water where woollens were scrubbed on wooden boards. Roadways leading to the farms and estates where my mother and aunties walked to sell fish. For me and Kitta, for Elspet and Liza, the pattern of the years ahead would be plain and safe and all the dreary same.

It didn't stop me from yearning, mind. Even my earliest memory ...

I was a wee bairn when I tottered into the winter sea. Straight in, clothes and all. Folk said later I was blessed to be alive, that my heart didn't stop, nor my blood turn white. Jockel Buchan, an old fisherman, strode through the shallows to reach me. Waded in, he did, almost to the knees of his great seaboots. I remember this, aye, but I don't remember feeling frightened, or cold, though how could I not have been? Nor the sound of Kitta and Liza squealing like piglets all the while he was hauling me ashore. Nor Unty Jinna shaking my shoulders and calling me *a raickless bairn*. These things they told me later. What I remember—aye, even now, I remember—is struggling to be free of the arms holding me safe, twisting round to the water again, searching the sea for another glimpse of the huge white wings that had lifted from the waveslick and flown far away into the sky. The most beautiful thing, lambsie! Ma used to say my *pretty birdie* was a kittiwake or a solan goose that had strayed too close to the shore, *and what a foolish bairnikie who would droon herself*

*for that!* But I knew it was something miraculous, and I cried to fly away with it.

Granda Jeemsie took on a rage about my little rush into the sea. He muttered for weeks and shook his head. He spat on the ground and marked a cross on the sand with the blade of his gullie knife. He gave a sixpence to the widow of Jockel Buchan when the old man and his yawl were taken by a storm that same winter. Jeemsie Neish giving away a sixpence! Now, that was a thing to remark on.

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My people would have recognised you, lambsie, you and your mother both. You have the look of Ma's side of the family—the Neishes—on your brow and in your eyes. Aye, and in the set of your frame, too. *Wifie's bones*, Ma used to say, her proud claim to generous hips and a strength in the spine fit for fetching and carrying. I canna expect you'll think on it as any sort of blessing, but you'd have been given the nod back then, lambsie, the nod and the closed-lipped smile of those parts that was grim and smug both.

Me, now, I always had the Neish build, too, but there was not a soul who would smile upon on a *reid-heidit* throwback from some ancient Pictish kin. The Neishes would lay no claim to red hair, and nor would Da's side, the Duthies. Be thankful this curse passed you by, lambsie. Aye, I know you're smirking, thinking your grunnie fanciful with talk of curses, but it was not a thing to smile about then, no.

Imagine this:

In the distance, a little quinie—a wee fisher girl—is running up near the braes, her hands flailing about like stars, long hair whipped from her scalp in knots and skeins. It's dusk. No-one pays her any mind. Too much to do. Loaded murlins to carry to the boats, the boats to be readied for sea, no time for else but the business of setting sail this night.

Granda Jeemsie and Da are striding in front with coils of lines slung about their shoulders. Ma and Unty Leebie are behind, bent under the weight of floats and ropes and hooks. Then come the boys, laden too, but still green enough to be full of the thrill of Going to Sea.

Suddenly Ma freezes. *No*. The word catches a moment in her throat. *No*, *NO*!

Leather floats tumble from her murlin, skitter across the sand. She swings around. *Archie! Jamie!* But they have seen for themselves and are already running, though too late to stop it, too late, too late.

The little quinie has danced her way down to the boatie shore, flitting along, chasing after gulls, her fists pounding the air as they escape her. She turns away from the sea.

Ma pants, florid. It could not be worse. The quinie is right in front of the fishers now. She is all Granda Jeemsie's scandalised face can see.

He stops. And so does Da. And Sailor Wattie. And Buckey's John and his boys. All of them stopped cold by this *reid-heidit* child who has put herself between them and the sea.

And then Granda Jeemsie rips the lines from his

shoulders. *Get from my sight!* is what he says, but the words are mangled up in rage. He stomps back to Tiller Street, pushing Ma aside with the meat of his hand, leaving the coils for her to gather and rewind. The rest of them follow, turning the dusk thick with spittle and mutter.

The fleet would not be setting sail that night.

I knew I'd done a terrible thing, and never would I do it again, but just what it was I'd done was a bewilderment that day. I made myself small on the sand, hugging my knees. Kitta will come, I told myself, Kitta will come find me. By the time I heard her calling my name, I was a wretched, whimpering, shivering thing. She dragged me to my feet and hugged me, and I wept into her plaited hair.

Kitta wiped away the snotty strings from my face with a scrunch of her skirt. *Ye're to be quiet now, Meggie mine*, she said firmly. *Home an' straight to bed, Ma says*. And when I nodded, she put a finger to her lips, took something from her skirt pocket and handed it to me. Turning the folded lump of bread over, I spied a pink sugar scraping inside. A jeely piece! I gasped, looked up. My sister was grinning.

Ma knelt by our closet bed later, and her voice was a gruff whisper. *The fishers say it's unlucky*, she told me, her fingers opening and closing as if trying to pluck something from the air. *And maybe they be right, quinnie, maybe no, but isn't for us to say when they be the ones the sea plays with, a witch who can give or take at leastest whim*.

I listened, aye, and I learned, and from then on I

stayed far from the boatie shore on the nights the men left so never again would they be cursed by the redhead crossing their path.

Mind, when it came to the things a Buchan fisherman thought cursed, the list was long. Pigs, rats, cats, hares, rabbits, salmon ... Even now it feels reckless to write that list of words, as any child of fisherfolk had it slapped into them, from the time they could point, that pigs were to be called *four-fitted beasts* or *grunters*, rats were *long-tailed fellers*, salmon, *the reid fish*. Pastors, now, they couldn't be named, nor seen near the boats, and we called the kirk *the bell hoose*. Strange, you think, that the work of the Lord should be held in such fear? Well, fishermen didn't like to take chances when it came to offending gods, the pagan and the Christian both. To show reverence to the Lord, well, that might upset the Witch.

I don't know, lambsie, just what it was about red hair that threatened the fishermen's pact with the sea. But I remember a day when our Archie was sending me dark looks as he dumped by the door a ruined twine of lines shredded by dogfish. Like the fault was mine. Ma took my chin in her hands and knelt down to whisper. *Don't ye fret, quinie, for if we end our days with hair at all, it all be the same colour*. But look, lambsie, see how wrong she was. Dulled with age it might be, but my hair has never gone the usual white or grey.

She could be soft at times, Ma could, when it came to me and Kitta, glancing around first to check there was none watching to mistake soft for weak. But she was a tough woman, aye, like all the fishwives of those parts,

because tough they had to be.

Times were different then. You're rolling your eyes again, aren't you, lambsie. *That's what old folk always say.* But it's true. Time matters. You will know this when you look it in the face. Isn't a child alive today who could have survived back then. I don't mean the hardships of those days—the meanness of the food, the idea that children should work for their keep. Those are things that can be endured, and if a child now were to be cast back through the years and flung into a but-and-ben in Roanhaven, the wee thing would learn. Learn and survive. People do when they have to.

No, the thing I venture would befuddle a child of today is this: in the scheme of the universe—your family, your village—you were one notch north of a hindrance and two south of a help. *Loved* you were, aye, in the way of those days, a careless kind of love that took all manner of things for granted. But if you had a thought in your head there was none who would stoop to hear it and none to say you mattered the peeriest thing. And if you were a girl, you'd to get used to that, aye. You would forever be the last, the very very last, in a world where the words of men and the ways of shoalfish and the direction of the wind were what mattered.

I canna imagine a child of today taking it into their head that they were not the centre of all else. That the world was not waiting for the next thing they might say.

May 1972

Ach, all the nieces and nephews of mine there might be in the world somewhere, all the family I don't know. Could be, lambsie, could be you are the first of the Neishes and Duthies to have your own special name, one that doesn't belong to a long line of those who have gone before you. *Laura*—that was your mother's choosing. Always a mind of her own, that one.

Maybe it seems I was going along with the past when I blessed your mother with a family name, but there's a thought to make me smile. It wasn't for tradition that I called your mother Kathryn, it was for someone I loved with all the beats of my heart. And because in the midst of so much forgetting, *this* I wanted to remember.





Kitta wasn't the name my sister was christened. Ma gave her Grunnie's name, Kathryn, but no-one ever called her that. Kathryn Duthie? Well, that wasn't any use to those who must know which Kathryn Duthie it was you meant when there were Duthies all about those parts, as far inland and along the coast as you could tramp in four days, and a Kathryn in every third but-and-ben besides. So they would make up tee-names. I suppose we would call them nicknames now. A stamp of ownership would be added, some little flourish to explain which Kathryn or Janet or Isobel, which of the Duthies or Buchans or Rosses, and that would be an end to it, whether you liked it or not. Me, I was Ginger Meggie to begin with. Ma was always called Jeemsie's Belle. There was Postie Andrew who drove the post cart. Net Tildie mended nets for the herring boats. Jinna's Liza—ah, now, that was a cruel one, for it told to all the world that there was no father to give a name to my cousin. Liza seemed always to carry that shame like a bundle on her back, like she was a child born to be sorry.

Kitta was a few days old when she saw Da for the first time. In he stomped, Weelim Duthie home from

the sea, a six-foot bluster of seaboots and salty wool, and they say she opened her eyes and screeched herself pink and purple at the face peering down into her crib. *Like a kittlin at the stranglin'*, Da pronounced in disgust. So Kathryn became Kitta. And to most in the village, she was Weelim's Kitta. You see, you never could get by with just the name from the pastor's blessing.

My beautiful Kitta. I wonder, you know, about names. Are they just labels to make the everyday easy, or have they some special power to bestow luck, good or ill, on the head of those they tag? Did the name Kitta turn a placid Kathryn into the wild girl people thought her, or was it always destined to be so?



I remember the day Kitta announced she would not marry. We were all of us plucking whelks from pools near the boatie shore, and Brukie's Sandy lolloped towards us in his gangling way. *Pretty Kitty!* he called in a gurgle of laughing, his slack-chinned face full of light.

Kitta straightened up and called out *Ay ay!* and *Here's some dulse for ye, Brukie's Sandy.*

He took the treat from her and waved his arm like a windmill as he galloped away, grinning back at Kitta. His cheeks were fat and bulging with the chewy, briny seaweed we all loved.

*Ooh-hoo*, Will sang. *There goes the bridegroom and here comes the bride!*

And Liza piped up in her tuneless little whine: *Ooh aye, ooh aye, Kit-ta's get-ting ma-ar-ried!*

Kitta smiled back at poor simple Brukie's Sandy and waved and waved until he was just a speck against the sky. And then she turned to the others, scornful, and put them straight. Married? Not her. Not ever.

Such a thing to say! Foolish. *Raickless*. Of course, the pronouncements of a twelve-year-old girl were normally paid no mind, not even by other children—except adoring younger sisters. But this day, there was something convincing about the way Kitta tossed her long dark plait when she said it. Something fearless in how she stamped her heel on the rubbery weed.

Elspet blanched, and Liza snorted loudly, and both of them looked to Will, who was thirteen and soon to Go to Sea with Archie, Jamie and the men.

*Don't ye be foolish*, he said, and he seemed to be casting about for some reassuring word. *Ye're no bonnie clip, that's true, but ye're a hardworking quine an' there's lads who don't take poorly to a fat face.*

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Could find no words. My lovely sister! Her beautiful face, like farm cream and Sunday roses!

Kitta shut him up with a look, withered the pity right there on his face. She didn't stoop to answer but that night she whispered to me, *I'll not be stayin' put to be married, Meggie mine. I'm goin' to leave this place an' see the world!*

I put my hand in hers and tried to smile and she squeezed my fingers hard.

It was madness. We girls weren't going anywhere. We had only to look at Ma to see the map of the rest

of our lives. Already we were in training, fetching and carrying for our brothers at sea, scraping the mud from their seaboots, reddin' the lines for the *Lily Maud*, cleaning before the men came in and after they went out again so our home was as neat as God's house. Good daughters who would become good fishwives.

And it was a sin to be caught hand-idle when we could be knitting. We knitted from the time we could master the simplest stitches—knit, purl, stockinette. Everywhere we went, no mind what else we might be doing, there'd be a ball of thick blue yarn and a pair of needles stuffed into our leather knitting belts—wiskers, they were called. And if there was a moment to spare, clean hands or not, we'd knit. Ganseys, drawers, mittens, scarves. Long seaboot stockings knitted in the round so there were no joins to rub the ankles of our fathers and brothers. It was a serious business, this, not just a thing to while away the hours before bed. We had to knit tightly, on fine needles, with never a dropped stitch: a gansey that let in the cold, the bite of that wind, was not a bit of use to a fisherman in a gale or a child gathering bait on the boatie shore or a fishwife tramping farm to farm across the heather moors. Those plain, workaday garments were all we had to keep ourselves warm, and everything we wore—*everything*, lambsie—we knitted ourselves. Oh, you canna imagine how scratchy they were, those woollen drawers and vests, how the fibres would chafe against your cold, raw skin! It would take years for them to soften, if ever they did, and I would take care to keep my old misshapen underclothes from

Ma's eyes, so she wouldn't make me knit myself a prickly new set.

We girls were yanked from the classroom from time to time to learn from our mothers. I'd to help Ma on her rounds through villages inland, to farm women, to cooks in the big houses. The burden Ma carried in the creel on her back would change its load as we went, but not its weight. The fish would be replaced with grain and neeps, butter and cheese. Ah, a long time it's been since I've thought of those days—the rhythm of our walking, the swaying of the creel, the way Ma would haggle to get a good trade.

It was just the way life was. Our labour was needed by family, fleet and village, and the children we bore would be the labour for a new generation. Kittie's vow not to marry, her wish to see the world, was purest foolery.

But I believed her. I'd have believed anything Kittie said. And I understood, oh aye, I did. Sometimes when you catch a glimpse of the everyday, something happens and the view gets skewed, and in that moment the way you look on things is changed forever. That's what had happened to Kittie and me years ago, when we saw *The Beasts that Go Down to the Sea*.

Imagine this, lambsie:

It's the muddy hours of an April dusk, and Unty Jinna herds three little girls to a high point up above Roanhaven, skybound and windblown. It overlooks the curve of coast where the boats leave for the shoals. They say Jinna comes here to remember the laughing man who loved her, who set off in his boat one night and never came home.

Salt stings our eyes when we lift our faces from the nest of our woollen shawls. Liza grizzles until Unty Jinna pulls from her pocket a piece of dulse. Kitta glances at me, a slight raise of a brow. Liza will cry at the least thing, and loudest when her mother has a pocketful of dulse.

From our place above, we can see the *Lily Maud* and the other boats jerking at anchor in the shallows. And then come the fishermen, weighted down with lines, the womenfolk behind them, staggering in the onrush of wind from the sea. A watery procession blurring in our eyes.

A sleety wind lashes us from the sea, flattens our skirts against our knees. Kitta and I pull at the wool with our mittened hands but it sticks to our legs like wet sails. Our eyes are raw from the howling wind. When we look down again to the boatie shore a vapour has risen from the sea, swirling skyward in shrouds of white. We gasp, Kitta and I. We canna breathe. And when our breath returns we shriek and shriek like a pair of hooked gulls. For there below us, lurching about in the shallows, are two-headed monster-people, hunchbacked and many-limbed.

The sea is full of beasts.

*What nonsense is this!* Unty Jinna slaps our cheeks. And when we huff out the terrible words, Jinna slaps us once more, exasperated. *Beasts? There be no beasts!* she tells us again and again.

But there were, and for a long time I would carry them in my head. It was all the more terrifying because Kitta, older and cleverer than me, had seen it, too. After

that, Kitta and I would speak quietly to each other of The Beasts that Go Down to the Sea—even though by then we knew it was a thing of the everyday we had seen: Ma and the other wifies rolling off their stockings, hitching up their skirts, ferrying the men on their backs from the shore to the boats. ‘Floating’ the men and their gear.

Ma was puzzled when we told her about the beasts, and talked to us as though to a pair of simpletons, spelling it out for us slow and plain.

*The men must be kept fit for work, quinies. They must keep their seaboots dry for the spell at sea. No fish, no money, see? No fish, no food!*

But it didn’t seem right—no, it did not—and what I felt in my spine that night is what I saw in Kitta’s face when she vowed to see the world and never to marry.

And I made a promise, too, lambsie, a promise to myself. Maybe I would marry, maybe not—I thought to keep my choices many. But my promise was this: I would carry no man on my back.



The year I turned eleven, the world began to change. Now that I look back on it, I know there were big things happening all over and everywhere. That man in America started up his motor vehicle empire. The war in Africa had just come to an end, with many a man and boy losing his life. Two brothers flew up into the sky in a fantastical machine, and flew down, too, which was more the wonder. And in the freezing north some silly explorer pushed off in a little boat to sail the Northwest Passage. That was World Progress in 1903, lambsie, a year that had its share of madmen.

None of that touched us in Roanhaven. And what Progress there was to speak of in Gadlehead town I couldn't say, either, because we didn't take much interest in the Gadle's world except for the market where Da took his catch. Or if the town happened to reach across to us in the village—which it was soon to do, with the curers and their wallets and their arling books. I'll tell you about them by and by.

In Tiller Street, Progress caught us by the scruff of the neck in 1903. For some years, fewer of the men had been fishing the home coast with longlines, returning



with loads of mackerel and ling after days at sea. The way of their fathers and grandfathers was a dying thing. Herring now was King, making its stamp on towns and villages all along the north-east coast. Roanhaven had started to change, too. Our men began the wrenching business of beaching family vessels on the boatie shore and hiring themselves to the new steam drifters from Gadlehead's fleet; no-one from the village could afford to buy a drifter. Da held out longer than most, hoping the deepsea fish would take hold in the markets again. But the Age of the Silver Darlings had come, and fishermen, if they were to remain fishermen, had no choice but to tie their fate to the herring. Grudgingly, Da and Sailor Wattie said that come spring they and the boys would join the fleets doing the circuit from the Western Isles up to the Shetlands, down along the home coast and further south to East Anglia. For nine months of the year they would follow the shoals.

Kitta had learned the names of the faraway places that Da and the boys would go to, and she listed them for us, holding court. *Stornaway*, she said, her eyes mysterious, her fingers tracing circles in the air. *Castlebay*, *Scalloway*. *Lerwick*, *Baltasound*.

*Will they see elephants?* Elspet whispered. *Will there be Wild Injuns?*

And we laughed at her, Kitta and I, laughed at such foolishness. But you know, lambsie, there was something hushed and magical about those foreign names, and it seemed to us that our fathers and brothers had become strangers already. At school we begged Miss Birnie to

show us on the coloured globe of the world. The speck she said was Aberdeen was the closest place to us, and we traced a line from there to where the herring boats would travel. It didn't seem so far on the globe, measured in bits of inches, but still we were in awe. And in time we would be jealous.

Only now, looking back, can I set my mind to thinking how jealous Granda Jeemsie must have been, how bitter to be left behind with the wifies and quinies. Too old for the drifters, he was, but fit enough still to take the *Lily Maud* out after cod and haddock off the coast—fish for those of us left in Tiller Street, and for Ma's creel. This he would manage with a makeshift crew—whoever he could find. Whoever was, like him, too old for the drifters, or perhaps too young.

And so that year it began to unravel, the pattern of life in Roanhaven, for so long knitted together with plain, sturdy yarn and only a rare dropped stitch or knobbly thread to interrupt the seamless everyday. The order of things changed, aye. But not the old ways.

And this is the important thing, lambsie. In 1903, in the midst of so much Progress, so much change, the old ones remained with us in Roanhaven. The old ways clung.

If ever I find the words to tell you about what happened to Brukie's Sandy, this is what you will have to remember.

June 1972

Kathryn and her worry eyes came today. All this nonsense about salt, I canna abide it. *I have been eating salt all my life, one way or another*, I told her. *I will not be taking my eggs without it now*. But she has been to that fiend with the horse face and gloomy words and has booked me in, she says, to have my blood pressure checked and all manner of other things.

I looked at her this morning and thought: I have a daughter of fifty-two years. Why should this thing I know already knock the breath from me? But the age of a child seems a greater marker of time than a person's own age, and it holds a special grief that comes with having walked already the path they are coming upon, knowing, suddenly, there are not many paths, just this one. My Kathryn. Isn't that her face is lined overmuch, she is silk-skinned, and beautiful still, but age is doing the pushing and pulling it always does, aye, and she is no more the quinie I still think her. Her hands, though, I like to look at her hands, smooth from the clay she works with.

How suspicious she was when I told her I wasn't ready to take my books back to the library yet. She gave

me a Look—oh, how like Ma she can be! Had I been going to town on my own again, she wanted to know, when I'd promised her I wouldn't? No, I said, and for once it was truth. I haven't been to town, nor anywhere. But I didn't tell her what it is that's taking up all my time, I haven't let her see me writing in my book. She wouldn't like that, no indeed.

But I am forgetting, lambsie, drifting off the track, writing as if to a diary of the day, instead of writing to you of the past.

What a strange thing it is, this looking back, remembering. There was this girl that was me, and she did this thing and did that, and I watch her in my memory. I know she was doing the right thing here, lost her way there, should have recognised dangers that seem so clear now. I wince when I see her do what she will regret, say things I know will hurt her in the end. I see her like a girl in a story. Someone a bit like me but more foolish, more wise, more brave, more this, more that. A bit like me but not me. And you're thinking: of course, that's how everyone remembers, like watching a film of their lives.

But sometimes I'm inside that girl, I'm inside the story. And I have no more idea of what she should do than she does herself—no wisdom to see from the outside—because I am the girl and the story will do as it will.



Meggie, Kitta whispers, her head low over a slate of chalky sums. *Meggie, hear. I'm goin' to the fish!*

*Ye're not!*

*Am too, Ginger Meggie.* And she produces a shilling from the pocket of her skirt, turns it over in the palm of her hand like it's a magic-man's trick. As well it might be for the way I gape at it.

She laughs softly. *Eh, hush your mouth, quinnie, or ye'll swallow a bumblebee.*

*But ye canna go to the fish. Ye know what Ma says: it's not respectable. She'll not let ye. An' Granda will ...* I stop. Am unable to imagine what Granda Jeemsie will say.

Kitta tosses her plait but doesn't look so sure. *Maudie Ross has signed—Maudie Ross!—and is there a livin' soul in Roanhaven would say the Rosses are not respectable? Ma will be pleased for the shilling.* She gives me a little push, looks at me anxiously. *She will, don't ye think?*

*But Granda ...*

*I've signed the book, Meggie. I've signed an' that's an end to it.*

But no, it was Ma who put an end to it. Granda Jeemsie never even got to say his piece, for it was over

before the *Lily Maud* came home next day. The shilling was returned and the whole of Tiller Street heard just what Ma thought of *chaifing snipes* who would take the pledge of a girl not yet fourteen and who didn't have her parents' leave to give it.

It was a wonder those arling men from Gadlehead kept coming back to sign up Roanhaven girls. They never had collected too many names in their books. Maybe the drift of fishers to the Gadlehead crews gave them hope, I don't know. But families slow to send their men to the herring were slower still to give up their women. It didn't pass the thoughts of those in the village that domestic life would not continue as it had, the girls doing the work they'd always done with never a glance to the world outside. Roanhaven families knew about the lasses gone to the fish, they'd heard how the crews travelled about by boat and by train, living far from their families—scandalous! It was no life for honest fisher girls, God-fearing and good.

But still the Gadlehead curers sent their hopeful men, offering girls the lure of a shilling to be arled for the season. And then, if a girl was a fast worker, she could bring home a little pile to the family at the end of the year. Those arling men were cunning with their silky words, aye, they knew just what to say, and every girl heard the word *escape* like a whisper. Becoming a gutting quine, well, it meant leaving the tight grip of family, travelling beyond the village, beyond even the town. A ticket to the wide world. Who wouldn't be gasping for that?

So Ma kept a narrow eye on Kitta, and let it be known—in Gadlehead, in the estates nearby—that she had a daughter ready to go into service. A respectable girl who worked hard and knew all she needed to and nothing indeed she shouldn't.

~

I remember that day, a week before Kitta's fourteenth birthday, like it's happening now. There she is, standing outside number 8 Tiller Street with her long braid looped up and tucked beneath Grunnie Neish's second-best hat. A flush is on her face, that sweet, lively face, and nervousness in the way she scuffs at the ground with the toes of her thick boots. A brand-new kist is by her feet, light as air to carry: Kitta hasn't much but underclothes and her needles and balls of wool. Rowscroft House supplies uniforms for kitchen quines, and she'll be given thread and needle and expected to make one of them fit her.

She has a little yellow daisy in her hat that someone has left on the lid of her kist. Brukie's Sandy, I think, and I wish I'd thought to do the same, I wish I'd picked her a whole bunch of yellow daisies to carry as she leaves.

*I'll knit ye a scarlet gansey to wear at Hogmanay, quinie,* she says lightly, flicking at my fringe with her long fingers. *Just the thing for a ginger head.*

I count up how many weeks and days to Hogmanay, when Kitta will come home.

*Oh, now, don't blub, Ginger Meggie, ye mustn't blub,* she says.

I look at her face, suddenly shiny, suddenly wet. *Don't ye blub yourself!*

She turns away as I hug the scratchy woollen jacket that my sister will wear on Sundays to a church that is only a few miles the other side of the Gadle but might as well be on the moon, or even in Aberdeen.

~

With Da and the boys gone, and now Kitta too, it seemed to be change, change, everything changing. But in truth, life coasted on for some time, in the way it had always done.

Da's goodbye to me was a short sermon on obedience and godliness. I'd heard him remark to Ma that I would be more useful now at home than at school and anyone in the parish with eyes could see that. She raised her brows but said nothing. From then on, I would push my palms together every night and pray to be given the two more years of school that the law allowed me.

How I loved that little schoolroom at the end of Hailness Street, with its long brown tables and wooden benches. It was there that I could read Real Books. I read them all, aye, every one the school had. *Kidnapped*, *The Dog Crusoe*, *Rob Roy*, *The Jungle Book*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Class Book of Physical Geography (New and Enlarged Edition)*, all seven volumes of *A Scottish Keepsake* and six of *The Willow Compendium of Prose and Verse*. What precious things, no matter their flaky spines and oily smudges smelling of fish. What exhilaration to open a book and disappear! My first notion, it was, that there were people



in the world who didn't live like us nor think like us, who gave no heed to the will of the sea. I didn't care much for Miss Birnie reading aloud to the class. No, it was words printed on the page I wanted, the feeling there was a voice speaking just to me as if I was someone who might understand, a person with Real Thoughts in her head.

I read anything that passed my eyes within the small world of Roanhaven: labels on boxes of matches, on packets of tea, on all manner of things. The amber bottle of Lifegiving Balm kept at the back of Ma's dresser that promised to *gently infuse its Kindly Influence into those Parts in the most perilous Disorder*. I had my eye always on the hymn books at church, out of bounds to the young, and I swear I'd have risked a strapping to lay my hands on the family Bible in Ma's kist, wrapped in calico and shavings of camphorwood and not to be touched, not ever. Only school gave me the gift of the page, and for that I tried hard to prove myself worthy.

Miss Birnie told Ma I was a Clever Lass, clever enough maybe for the big school in Aberdeen, though Da would never have given me leave to go if ever he'd been asked. It didn't come to that anyway because of what happened. Still, for all the praise heaped on my head for reading, for penmanship, even for sums, I was found wanting when it came to the business of learning housewifery and practising needlework. That, lambsie, was the part of school I didn't like. It would wash over me, leaving no more lasting impression than the tracks of a crab across the sand at low tide. Instead of paying

mind to my needles, I'd be listening to Mr McCrindle on the other side of the room, teaching the laddies. How could heel-darning and the barleycorn stitch compare to Astronomy? But the tracking of the moon and the constellations was the work of men-to-be who must know the way to the shoals and back. Girls? Pah. Girls were to keep their eyes down.

At home, there was always work to do, just more of it since Kitta had gone. Granda didn't go out to sea for days any more. He couldn't manage the lines without a strong crew; the weight was too much for him. But every few nights he'd take out the *Lily Maud* with his straggler-helpers and return next morning with a modest haul. Before school we'd scrape the fish clean of scales with twigs of birch, knife out the insides and take off the heads, and then split each fish to dry. If the weather was good, they'd go on racks outside, but more often we'd hang them in the chimney. Ooh, the smell of them there, smoking lightly, scented with fir cones burnt to ash in the grate! The dried ones were called speldings and the ones in the chimney were smokies. I wish you could taste them, lambsie. Nothing like that today, no.

Reddin', now, that was always women's work, and Granda left us to it. After school, Liza, Elspet and I would clean the hooks—a stinking job! Pinching off bits of rotten bait, checking the knots of horsehair that tied each hook to the snoods of the lines. And before Granda took out the *Lily Maud* again, we'd to gather bait for the wily bottom feeders: cod, haddock, whiting. Whelks were best, scraped off stones in briny pools, but even in

April we'd oftentimes be breaking a crust of ice to find them. When whelks were scarce, we'd pluck limpets and mussels from rocks in the shallows. Shelling—another job I couldn't abide. Always there were enormous mounds of empty shells along Tiller Street and right down to the boatie shore. Whelks and limpets, those were parboiled first and then shucked, but mussels had to be prised out of a slimy sea syrup. Horrible! The smell of shellfish has forever made my nose run, my eyes itch. Agony, it was, not to scratch the burning till my lashes fell out.

And it was a job made the worse for the absence of my Kitta. Wasn't that I didn't like my cousins—oh, but that Liza! If she wasn't whining she was prattling fit to give us all a pain in the peenie.

One day she fixed us both, Elspet and me, with a wide-eyed stare I'd come to mistrust.

*So, what d'ye think they told me, those tinkie lasses, up by the peatie bog?*

I shrugged. Elspet looked at me and shrugged too.

*Go on, think of what,* Liza urged.

I rolled my eyes at Elspet and carried on shelling.

*How ye get to be preggernant, that's what!* And Liza sat back and waited, her bug eyes smug.

Elspet made a clicking noise with her tongue. *Everybody knows that,* she said softly.

I looked at her, surprised. Imagine Elspet knowing something like that, something I didn't.

Liza was crestfallen but, determined to gain ground, gave a startling account that seemed to grow more and more fanciful, more and more *naked*, by the word. It was

instantly clear, from Elspet's face, that the details she'd been given were scanty, the picture incomplete. First she tipped her head to one side and looked at Liza sceptically, but by the end of the tale she was gasping and I was thinking: Aye, quinie, aye.

*No drawers?* said Elspet faintly when Liza paused for breath.

The bow of Liza's top lip creased and she snorted. *Of course no drawers!*

I threw an empty shell as far as I could in the direction of the boatie shore, and resolved to ask Kitta when she came home.

~

On the day before Granda's trips, we would bait the lines, and at night Ma and Unty Leebie would head off to the boatie shore, struggling with murlins loaded with lines and bulls' bladders bloated up for floats, or big flat ballast stones from the river. I was left to clean up after supper, to see to the fire, to knit, but while no-one was there to see me I would perch a wee while on the stone wall in front of the lean-to, looking across to the boatie shore. Something compelled me to watch, I don't know why. In the distance, in the plumes of mist lit by fishermen's lamps, were Ma and Unty Jinna and Unty Leebie, wading back and forth between the *Lily Maud* and the shore—the lighter murlins floating before them, the weightier loads balanced on their heads. But I would climb down from the wall when Ma crouched in the shallows for Granda to climb onto her shoulders, to be delivered to the *Lily*

## WATER

*Maud* with his seaboots warm and dry. As I shuddered, I could feel Kitta—far away—shuddering along with me.

Before the men went away to the herring, they would sing as the fleet left at night. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want* ... I can never hear the words of that psalm without remembering the sound of their voices and the way the wind would blow them back to us from the sea.

There was a fleet no more at Roanhaven, no more that comforting choir. Whatever god Jeemsie might have bowed to as he set sail, he kept his prayers to himself.

July 1972

All those pages filled up in my wee book and I'm not yet past 1903! At this rate I'll not be finished in time for your birthday, lambsie. But I'm finding as I think and remember, and try to write what I think and remember, that it's a funny thing about stories that are real and not fairytales. They are more than just the things that happened, aye. You think about one thing, and what came first, what next, and then you're off in another time and thinking of that. And then it takes you by surprise to see so many threads between them, looping in and out and all around—everything connected. Stories can't just tumble out like buttons from a box, clattering and random. You have to think of the order of things. What to tell. And what to leave out.

The family routine turned a little, weaved a little, to gather in the changes of that year and stitch them into the pattern of what had always been. But then things came among us, new things, and they pulled the pattern out of shape, this way and that. I used to think it began the day Granda came home with his leg busted and the poison in the palm of his hand, but that's not right, I can see that now. I have to go back a few paces to find the shift in the world.

And there it is, right in front of me.



Elspet grabs hold of my gansey elbow and pulls me to the lean-to between our but-and-ben and Unty Jinna's. Pointing frantically, she is gulping at the air. Such a meekling, Elspet, as scaredy as a cradle bairn, seeing fairies everywhere.

The shed smells of tarred rope and the must from old murlins that Ma won't toss away.

*There, Ginger Meggie, there! Can ye see?*

I drop to my knees beside a stack of rope, turn my head sideways to the ground. No fairies, no. But something. A shivering mass of wet fur.

*Hello, wee doggie, I whisper, crawling forward quietly, my hand out.*

*Ooh, Meggie! Elspet squeals. Ye shouldn't. Ye'll get yourself bit!*

The pup is as scrawny as a sick hen, matted up and ragged round the snout. It tries a growl that comes out all wrong, like the wheeze of Ma's bellows before she mended the split in the concertina bit. I reach again, I brace myself, for, much as it pains me to admit it, Elspet might be right. But the wee thing whines and slumps with its snout to the ground. Dead, I think. And then the twitch of an eye.

I cradle it close, willing the beating of my own heart to manage for us both, but at the door, I stop. I need food for the dog. I need a place by the fire to keep it warm. I need my mother's blessing.

Ma purses her lips.

I rehearse quickly in my head: The wee thing will eat scraps and sleep in the lean-to and I will do the gathering and shelling and reddin' just the same and go to school just the same and it won't get underfoot of anyone and when it's strong and big ye'll never know it's there and I will wash all Da's ganseys and seaboot stockings when he gets back for Hogmanay and the boys' too, all the smelly ones, and I will carry the heaviest murlin and the biggest creel ... and ... and ... But it's a funny thing about dogs: they know a true heart. The pup looks straight at Ma and speaks for itself.

And that's how it comes to be that Granda Jeemsie finds us by the fire that night, me on my knees on the sooty rug, the dog licking at a bit of old fish head.

He stands in the frame of the door, furrowing and frowning. *What foolery has come to this house?*

I know better than to speak. Ma is knitting in the chair. She says nothing, too.

*I give no leave for no fulpie. Take it out an' away!* he growls, a scowl on me.

Ma carries on with her knitting. *I gave Meggie leave for her wee whelp, Da. I see no harm.*

*Have ye stones in your head, quinie? Cloth in your lugs?* Granda's punchy hands are jumping and twitching. *Out an' away, I said, out an' away now!*



I look at Ma, then back at Granda.

*I don't see the harm, Da, Ma repeats and puts her knitting down. An' I don't think Weelim will stoop to bother about a whelp.*

Mild enough, Ma, but if Granda had shifted his thundery eyes from me, he would have seen the Look, and maybe it wouldn't have changed what happened next but he wouldn't have been so surprised about it.

*I'll not tell ye again,* he threatens, reaching for a block of peat in the pail by the door. But Ma is on her feet and her hand grips the upswing of his arm.

I gather up the dog and hug him to me, both of us shivering from the chill in the room as Granda flings open the door, rattling the hinges, and stumps off into the howl of the night.

~

So proud I was, lambsie, to have a wee doggie of my own. I couldn't say what kind of dog it was—a bit gingerish, like me, with a white blaze on his side the shape of a wing. I called him Crusoe. Like Dick Varley's brave-hearted dog in that book Miss Birnie had read to us and I'd borrowed to read again myself.

How I longed to tell Kitta. Owning a dog, well, that was no common thing among fisherfolk. An extravagance, it was, a mystification. The only person thereabouts I knew of was Lady Ferguson, wife of the Laird of Pitfour, and she was gentry with idle time on her hands, and folk thought her an oddness anyway. I saw her once at Mintlaw, while Ma and the Fergusons' cook were

haggling at the kitchen door. I peered through a gap in the hedgerow and watched Lady Ferguson parading on the cool green lawn with three terriers on golden leashes. Ma wouldn't believe it when I told her later but they were wearing *clothes*, those dogs! Aye, jaunty tartan jackets that buttoned under their bellies. Imagine! I wouldn't put clothes on a dog but the leash, now, that seemed a grand idea. I looped a rope over Crusoe's head but the poor wee thing almost strangled himself trying to pull out of it. It didn't matter, he didn't need a leash. Always he was close by my heels, except to chase gulls on the boatie shore. A good wee dog, he was, and a bother to no-one.

Crusoe thrived on whatever scraps Ma didn't want for soup, and I made sure Granda could have no complaint about the dog, nor me. But I had set something among us on the day I brought Crusoe into our home. Granda felt himself wronged, and his ill-temper had come to stay.



There came a time in the autumn of that year when I realised something terrible: I hated Granda Jeemsie. It was shocking to have thought such a thing. To hate, now, that was a sin. Ma had once given me a good hard slap to the side of the head when I said I hated milk pudding. Imagine, just imagine, the punishment for hating a person, and such a person as your own granda. No-one must ever know, I told myself. I will keep it inside my own head and none will know. But that very Sunday, Pastor McNab fixed his eye on me and bellowed at the congregation: *Be sure: your sins will find ye out!* Words from the Bible. I looked away from

his turkey face. Pastor McNab had already decided I was Trouble that day in Sunday school when he heard me telling Liza which Bible stories I loved the best. *The Bible is not a set of STORies for your enterTAINment, Meggie Duthie! The Bible is the WORRRD of GOD!*

I never did hear Granda say the word *hate*, but he was a hating man himself, indeed he was. He hated to be kept waiting when he came home from the *Lily Maud*, hungry for soup and bannocks. He hated losing his pipe, a daily plague, and sulked at Ma when she remarked that he was the only one who would touch the filthy thing and whoever else but he could say where it might be? He hated the noise of children. And the singing of hymns on Sunday. And anything like singing, for that matter, even the whistling songs of Piper Stewie, which everyone thought pure and true, as sweet as a melodian. And I fancied he had now formed a particular hatred of dogs.

On that autumn evening in 1903, I watched the others leave the house. Forbidden, as always, from putting my accursed self in the way of fishermen off to their boats, I was to clear the plates and wash them in a bucket, but first I would scramble up the stone wall in front of the lean-to and tuck my boots under my skirt. From here I could see all the way to the *Lily Maud*. Ma pulling off her boots. Unty Jinna wading into the sea. Granda Jeemsie stacking ropes. All of them puffing white breath.

Crusoe usually waited at the foot of the wall, dancing on his stumpy hind legs and whining at me, *Come down, come down*, but on this day he trotted along to the shore, following a skimming guillemot. And he passed Granda.

The old man gave him a kick with his seaboot. Crusoe yelped, he tumbled and rolled, and then he limped to the nearest safe place. By the time I had jumped from the wall to find him, he had hunkered down under a pile of nets in Net Tildie's lean-to. He wouldn't come out for me that night, nor next morning, or next. Days, it was, *days* before I could coax him out, poor bruised little thing.

Jeemsie knew I'd seen him. He probably heard my cry and then the sound of my running boots. But although he didn't turn back to be tainted by the *red-heidit quinie*, I'd seen him from Net Tildie's and I'll tell you this: a flush was on his face. He was pleased with himself, aye, pleased with his small disgusting victory.

It was wrong to hate, I knew that, lambsie, and very wrong to hate your elders, but that's what I muttered to myself that night. *I hate you, Granda.*

God was on my mind, God and Pastor McNab and how my sins would find me out. Well, they do, you know, lambsie, I suppose they always do in the end. But it was not *my* sin that God chose to punish. Or so it seemed, for a while.

~

He is trundled home, injured, in a cart down Skeel Street and into Tiller, one leg still with the seaboot on and the other flopping loose in his breeches. He doesn't look like Granda Jeemsie at all.

That florid scowl of his is pale as boiled cabbage. He breathes hard, panting sharply—just like I saw a seal do

once before Da and Buckey's John knocked it dead. I cried for the sealie, cried for hours. I don't cry for Granda.

Mackie's Peter, spry old feller he is, older than Granda by a decade or more, wheels the cart into the but and eases himself into Granda's chair, stretching his stiff legs by the fire.

*Rise, ye old gaak, an' get me out,* Granda wheezes.

*Aye,* Peter says but he takes his own time, indeed he does, and looks down on him as though Granda is a large, amusing child.

By the time Granda is in the chair himself, bootless and wincing, Ma has boiled water and is mixing hyssop and mustard into a bitter-smelling paste.

*An' how did a beastie manage to break your leg, too?* she demands to know.

*Never ye mind, lass. Just strap it up quick an' get that poultice on here.* Granda thrusts up his big hairy arm and opens a palm already pussèd-up and swelling.

Mackie's Peter snorts and Ma gives him one of her Looks. I can tell, plain as flour, that as far as she is concerned it is no laughing matter to have Granda laid up and helpless and generally in the way. But that old man, that Mackie's Peter, he has a funny way of looking on things, and in any case he would pay no more mind to Ma and her Looks than to his own wifie.

*Old gaak, he is,* he tells Ma. *Or maybe his eyes be gone, for it's purest foolery to grab the beastie by the fins of its back. Tripped hisself over his own boots with the shock of it an' fell half into the hatch. The poison got him. Aye, got him good!*

Mackie's Peter is enjoying himself.

Granda glares and probably has words of his own all ready to say, but it's then that Ma slaps the paste onto his palm. Such a roar! I clap my hands on my ears, and when I dare to look it's as though Granda's real face has slipped off like the skin of a hare boiled all the day, and left behind a punch of dough, all pink and grey and bloated.

Another snort from Mackie's Peter as he backs out of the door.

Me, I'm jumping to know what beastie has poisoned Granda's hand, so I skitter after Mackie's Peter.

*Ah, was a dogfish, quinie—a greedy one, an' all, still latched onto a coddie as we was haulin' up the line. An' that old gaak, fool he be, he takes on a rage an' just grabs it without thinkin' ... And Mackie's Peter shakes his head. There'll be no fishing on the Lily Maud now, not for a wee while. Your da'll just about have a jamaica when he hears.*

I stare hard at the old man's back as he raises a hand and shuffles away. The prospect of the *Lily Maud* beached and no fish for Ma's creel and Da having a jamaica should have sent the cold through my bones, but when I turn back towards Tiller Street there's a smile shining up my face. So it was a dogfish that got Granda and made him howl. A *dogfish*! And doesn't that just serve him right!

~

Oh lambsie, if you could have seen it. Jeemsie Neish glowering by the fire, scumblin' up for himself all the warmth from the smoking peat. It caused a gasp from every person who entered the but-and-ben. This was not part of the order of things.

He was a salty man, my Granda, with ears like whelks and brine in his eyes. Remote, like all those men from the sea. Silent on the land. You could hear their talk dwindling the further they got from the shore, as though the thing that was most alive in them, the purpose for their words, died a little with each step. By the time they reached their homes, stamping boots and discarding waterproof layers, scratching at scalps beneath thick woollen caps, they were silent. Men like that, they walked on land as though wary of the way the earth would not give with their weight. With people, now, it was different. They were used to people giving way.

There he sat, Granda Jeemsie, his leg propped up on the creepie-stool, a great clumsy presence among the knitting yarn, the pots and pans, the herbs hung up to dry. Above the mantel, like a rebuke from the grave, the small neat stitches of Grunnie Duthie: *My grace is sufficient for thee*.

He would glare at anyone who stopped to warm themselves by the fire, and there was no end to the things he needed while he waited for his troublesome leg to mend. *Fetch me this, quinie. Fetch me that*. Tea. His pipe. His woollen hat. The tin of tobacco whose words had all but rubbed way. Ma kept her face mild but I fancy I could always tell what Ma was really thinking behind her careful face. The aunties and the girls avoided us when they could. Why take part in Granda's suffering? I couldn't blame them for that, but I felt aggrieved just the same. Because it was worse for me than for all of them, aye, all of them put together. Just the sight of me made

the old man broody, like a man with seven years' bad luck stitched to the hem of his gansey. Granda was not going to leave me to my own ill schemes, no, he was not: I was a thing to be ground down hard beneath the coarse pad of his thumb, to be run ragged till the air blew out of me.

You're a smart one, lambsie, you'll know, you'll be nodding your head already. I hadn't escaped the punishment of my sins at all.

~

When the day came for Ma to set off with the last of the fish, I helped her to fasten the leather strap across her collarbone. Only a little did she stagger as she took the creel's weight. She was strong, Ma was, and could carry heavier loads than this. I passed her a knitted piece I'd made for her to tuck beneath the leather, to help protect her skin from the worst of the rubbing as the creel swayed.

In truth, she didn't need my help. No mind how heavy, Ma could hoist the basket onto her back herself. But these small fussings gave me pleasure and pride, and I fancy Ma liked them too. And it gave her the chance to list off, one more time, all the things I must not do and all the things I must. Oh, how weighty they felt, my responsibilities, as weighty as the creel, for now I had the job of looking after Granda.

She squeezed my cheeks in her hands before she left. *We're relying on ye, Meggie, me an' your da, an' ye know what's to be done.*



Perhaps she knew what I was thinking too because she added: *Don't ye pay no mind to Granda Jeemsie's mumpin'. He's an old man, but he's ours, see? Family. But keep that whelp from his sight an' the reach of his one good footie!*

Lost, I was, when the grip of her hands relaxed. One last pat on the arm and she was away, into the grey of morning.

~

I'd no excuse for slipping off to the boatie shore for bait, or to the lean-to for reddin' the lines, not when the *Lily Maud* wasn't going out. And with winter nearly upon us, there was only so much staying away that could be done when the wind sliced its way through layers of wool. So cold, lambsie, you canna imagine, your fingers and toes bloodless white. And so every day when school was done, I'd be off home, walking with Liza and Elspet, envying them the friendly fireplace waiting for them at home.

Ours had become Granda's.

~

He held out his great paw, the fingers poking from the bandage a funny colour, like rotted weed. His face was sour as he waved the injured hand about. *Hurry yourself, quinie, hash, hash.*

But I was slow at unwinding the muslin strapping that Ma had applied so carefully, and it didn't help when he sucked in his noisy breath every time I tugged at his skin. Finally, when I had a foot or more of bandage coiled

around my own fingers, I could see that the remaining piece was stubborn, gluey on the wound.

He was impatient, ready to pull it free with his other hand. Anyone could see that would rip away the beginnings of a healing skin and do more harm than good. And it would hurt. He was surprised when I raised my hand to stop him, and he drew back. It made me a little braver. I brought a bowl of warm water to soak off the bandage, and all the while Granda was giving me the eye. He grunted when I was done cleaning and drying, he waved me away as though I was something small and bothersome.

Later, when I sat with my knitting at the table, he spoke.

*What nonsense did ye be learnin' away at school today, then?*

It took me a moment, lambsie, to realise that Granda was not just grumbling at the world at large again. He was asking me a question. Inviting me to speak. I looked at him warily.

*What cat caught your tongue an' run away with it, quinie?*

*We had Dictation ...*

He made a noise like a snorting horse.

*... an' Musical Drill ...*

*Musical Drill! Ye're kept from proper work for that! Pah!*

*I give no leave for quinies to be bletherin' about with Musical Drill.*

Now, I knew it was the law that put me in school, not Granda's blessing, but I did not say it. He simmered down soon enough, muttering at the fire, glancing at me by and by.

*An' what do they learn ye at school about the ways of the sea?*

I opened my mouth to tell Granda that it was only the lads who got to learn Astronomy and Seamanship from Mr McCrindle and the sea didn't seem to concern Miss Birnie overmuch. But then I closed it again and shook my head.

He slumped down further in the chair, wincing as his bad leg moved on the creepie-stool. And then, to my astonishment, he fixed me with his eye and said, *Hearken now, quinie, an' I'll tell ye a thing.*

*The sea is a witch, a witch an' a mother. With a hand of plenty when she has a mind to be kindly an' a curse when she don't. She can sing a mannie to his death. To his death, d'ye hear? Aye, that's true, quinie!*

And Granda checked my face for signs of doubt.

*Aye, true as the tide. True as God. I seen it with my own eyes.*

Granda settled back a wee shrug.

*I seen her take young Tullie's Mickel, long time back, on the Kittiwake. Was a north wind howlin' all the long night, blastin' at our backs as we hauled in the linies, an' I could hear the trill of the Witch in it, all of us could, an' we huffed a wee bit louder as we pulled on the linies, an' stamped our boots against the cold, an' tugged the wool snug upon our ears—all to keep the lurin' song away from our minds. But that young Tullie's Mickel, he didn't know the sound maybe, he didn't take the care he ought. No, an' he was doomed, that boy. A goner.*

Granda was not looking at me any more. His eyes were on the door of the but and I fancied they could see

through the slats of wood worn smooth and shiny by mittened hands, beyond the houses on the other side of Tiller Street, beyond the street too, and way on down to the boatie shore and the witchy sea that sings from the depths and can make a boy a goner.

*All the night that laddie let her in, he let his blood cool to the bewitchin' song, an' come the morning, when all the howl had died from the wind an' the edge of the sky was lit, d'ye know what that loon did? Eh?*

He was looking at me again. I shook my head.

*He goes an' takes a ballast stone under each skinny elbow an' he runs. 'Here I go!' That's what he cried, that daftie loon. 'Here I go!,' all cheerful like, an' splash, straight into the Witch's arms, sunk an' gone. Befuddled to his death by her song.*

Granda was out of breath now but his eyes were popping bright, daring me to disbelieve.

*Just think on it, quinie, next time ye're bletherin' about at school with Musical Drill. Just mind what I tell ye about poor Tullie's Mickel an' what happened when he let music into his head. Nothing good, eh. No good can come from music!*

After I made Granda a cup of tea, plenty of sugar, I sidled out to see Crusoe. A harsh afternoon, it was, a sleety wind about, but warmer for him in the netting shed than under Granda's eye. Crusoe raised his snout and swished his tail, but he stayed where he was, back from the draught. I pulled some old sailcloth around him.

Thump-thump from the but. Granda's stick on the wooden floor. He'd be wanting his supper.

Inside I took a smoky haddock and laid it flat on the table. Dry it was, tough to flake, especially with

my fingers so dead and white, but dry and tough never mattered for soup. I kept glancing at Granda as I cut up the tatties. I couldn't tell if he was asleep, or dreaming-awake at sea again. A question was tugging at my mind.

*Granda, I said finally. Are ye not afraid, Granda?*

He jerked around at the sound of my voice, hauled back from wherever it was he'd been.

*On the Lily Maud, I mean. Are ye not ever afraid? Of the Witch? Of bein' a goner?*

He grunted and turned back to the fire. *Just get my soup, quinie.*

~

When I came home from school the next day, Granda was scowling and his bandaged hand was swollen, the fingertips bulging and dark.

*What have ye done! he growled. The very devil. Poisoned it be, just look.*

*I don't know,* I whispered. Whatever *had* I done? I'd used Ma's clean muslins, diluted the vinegar with sea water, wrapped the hand like Ma had shown me. And yet here was proof I had got it terribly wrong.

I poured warm water from the kettle into a bowl, and kneeled by the creepie-stool. *I'm sorry, Granda, I'm sorry. Does it pain ye?*

*'Do it pain ye?'* she asks. His voice was high and girly, mimicking me, and I almost laughed, swear to God, lamsie. But a second later I was paling before his glare and nothing funny on my mind.

*Of course it pains me!* he roared.

My hands shook a little as I stripped off the bandage. Both of us gasped. Sodden, it was, and the smell! Like the slime of a rotten mussel.

If Granda's poisoned hand pained him now, there was worse to come while I cleaned it out. I talked to him low and soft, like crooning, the way I shushed Crusoe when he whimpered. *Now, then, Granda ... there, now, Granda.* But still he carried on his mumping and grumbling, snatching his hand back every time I tried to sponge away the evil-looking pus.

*Granda, I tried, Granda, will ye not tell me about the Witch again?*

He looked at his sorry hand and away, and then back at me. It was a look that said he knew what I was about, aye, he knew, true as the tide, true as God, but he would play along so I could get the job done.

He sighed. *A mannie be a fool if he's not afraid of the Witch. Bein' afraid is bein' alive. An' stayin' that way. Men not afraid are careless. They whistle the wind, wake the Witch from the deep an' bring their boats to ruin. Tullie's Mickel wasn't afraid, an' he were careless too. An' old Jockel Buchan, aye ...* He snapped his head back to me—a strange look it was. Then he stared into the fire again. *Well, more of them as can be named or counted in my time. It doesn't do to dare the Great Mother. Ye can never say when she will turn her other eye on ye. Fishermen know to be canny, an' how to protect theirselves.*

He started fumbling in his vest with his good hand, fishing about inside.

*See here, quinie.*

He took something from his pocket, from the fold of a bit of paper, and laid it carefully on the arm of the chair. Grey and puckered, it was, something like leather thinned by time and worn down to a waxy nothing. I stopped my cleaning.

*Go on, go on*, he said, gesturing.

I touched it with the tips of my fingers. *Ugghh*.

*Pah!* said Granda. *Ye don't know, quinie. Ye don't know gold when ye sees it. Purest luck, this. Kept a wee babby safe for nine belly months an' your granda for near on fifty years. Safe at sea, safe from droonin'.*

I snatched my hand back. Now I knew what it was, this charm of Granda's. *How ... how did ye come to have it?*

His eyes shifted darkly. *Purest luck, purest luck ...* It was a story he was not going to tell me.

I thought about it, lambsie, as I sponged Granda's hand. Fifty years before, someone—some desperate mother, some greedy howdie wifie—had peeled the caul off a newborn's face and sold it to a fearful sailor. Purest luck, indeed, but that infant probably never did know about the precious gift they'd been born with. The shrivelled membrane on the arm of Granda's chair was a robbery from a babe.

~

For days, until Ma came home, it went on like this: me bandaging Granda's hand, cooking his supper; him glaring at me one moment and, the next, telling me about the sea in his faraway voice.

Those stories of his, or perhaps it was the way he told them—something changed the hardness of my heart for Granda. Did I still hate him? Aye, I did, for wasn't Crusoe banished to the netting shed still, and did I not remember the bruises from Granda's seaboot? And much else besides. But hate is a hard thing to hold upright and strong when pity starts to eat away at the edges of it. And the funny thing was: I thought I could see that same worrisome puzzle on Granda's face when he looked at me, his accursed quinie.

I don't think either of us knew what to make of the other any more.





Not long after Ma came back, something happened, something wondrous, that thinned the heavy fug that seemed to be all around me then. And it was to change all my days forever after. Aye, even this day, I've held its sweetness in my hand.

Miss Birnie told us girls to wear our best aprons to school and the boys to mind they washed the mud off their boots, because we were to have a Special Visitor, and Pastor McNab too. Whatever could it be for? we wondered, lining up from tallest to shortest and readying ourselves to sing 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus'. We always sang that for Pastor McNab.

The visitor was the Inspector from Aberdeen. Such a disappointment! He came every year, the Inspector did, to do his counting. That's what we called him: Mr Counter. He counted heads, he counted desks and chairs, he counted how many pieces of chalk Miss Birnie had, and how many slates were in the room, and the books in the library cupboard too. We always bowed and said Good Morning but he'd be too busy counting and writing numbers in his book to take any notice. But this day he stood at the front of the class, fidgiting on his

feet, and looked around without counting. *Good Morning*, we said, and his face oozed out a smile—you know the kind, like you’ve a pain in the peenie that you’re trying not to let on about in case someone brings out the castor oil. Miss Birnie, she was smiling too, but anyone could see she really was happy. Pastor McNab shifted his fierce eyes from one to the next.

*Children*, said Miss Birnie, her palms clasped together, *the Inspector has come from Aberdeen to give out a prize. Yes, for the student who has been the hardest-working of you all.*

Well! Nothing like that had ever happened before. We all murmured and looked at each other.

The prize, Miss Birnie went on, was to be a book. Mr Counter held up a box awkwardly, and oozed a bit more. A book! And Miss Birnie was smiling right at me! Liza, from behind, pinched the back of my arm and if I hadn’t been holding my breath I would have yelped, it hurt so much.

Mr Counter said my name and Miss Birnie said, *Yes, you, Meggie*, and Liza pinched me again and Elspet squealed, *Ooh, Ginger Meggie, that’s you, that is!*, and my classmates were so rough about pushing me forward to glory that I went flying onto my knees in front of old Counter’s shiny boots. But I didn’t care, I didn’t care at all, because I was to be given a book!

Miss Birnie beamed at me as she helped me up. She gently took the box from Mr Counter so he could shake my hand, and then she invited me to choose. My eyes must have been popping in disbelief because she nodded at me and gave the box a little shake. Yes, I could really choose!

I was tempted by a copy of the Bible, the real thing, a book for grown-ups. There was a hymn book, too, in the same dark blue covers, and a handsome volume of *A Child's Illustrated Treasury* with a colour picture of Noah's Ark on the front. And then I saw *my book*, grand and green, a wreath of blue flowers curling around the title. My hand shot out. I glanced at Pastor McNab and his thundery brow and I took it anyway.

My first ever book: *The Girls Forget-Me-Not Annual of Prose and Verse*.

*Pah*, said Granda from his chair by the fire when I showed it to Ma. She looked flustered and pleased and patted my arm a couple of times, and remarked they were very nice, the flowers on the front. She wanted to wrap it in calico and put it in her kist with Grunnie's old Bible. *Ye'll be wise to keep it out of harm's way, our Ginger Meggie*.

But I begged her no. I didn't want to hide it away safe, I wanted to read it, to fill my head with its words.

She looked at me, and she looked across to the fire, where Granda sat, hunched and grumbling over his tea, and she put the book on the dresser next to the cornflower milk jug of Grunnie Neish's that was there for an ornament and not to be used. She patted my arm again and sighed and told me I was a Clever Girl, but she didn't look as though this was a thing to be happy about.

That night, before the lantern was doused, I took the precious book down from the dresser and opened it up to the list of names at the front. Some I knew already—Walter Scott, Robert Burns, John Keats, Mary

Shelley. But there were many stories and poems whose authors remained a mystery: ‘by the Eltrick Shepherd’, ‘by the author of The Legend of Genevieve’, ‘by the Sylvan Voice’, ‘by the Lily of Lorn’. I turned the thick pages, shiny like the inside of a shell, admired the flowery patterns around the edges. I stopped to read lines here, lines there. I memorised words I did not know, to ask Miss Birnie their meaning. *Sanctity. Melancholy. Indelible.* I whispered them to myself, like a spell.

A heather bough cracked in the fireplace. Sparks shot out.

I looked up. Granda’s eyes, red like coals, were watching me.