

## A Good Place to Get

Words never flew faster than a man could walk or a ship sail. There was a stranger at her door. He crouched at the step, tapping the hot ash in his pipebowl with a scarred fingertip. Flora paused on the hill, the peat creel a heavy ache across her shoulders.

Beyond the cottage, the bay paced north and south, manacled to its stacks and headlands. The seaweed on the tideline had dried to crisp funeral crepe.

The path from this little ridge turned left, turned right, stepped up and down and found its own descent across boulders, burns and shough so that Flora had to glance, to pause to look, then carry on wondering blindly about her visitor. Two sheep and Flora moved in the stillness of the summer afternoon. The man could not fail to notice her progress in jerks and steadyings yet he himself remained still. He did not stand to welcome her to her own door. He did not shift anxiously about the in-by field. He crouched. He smoked. He watched her.

She halted by the dyke. “Good day to you,” she called.

“Good day to you, Flora,” the stranger replied. “Do you not recognise me?”

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He recalled a time when they were bundled virgins, face to face. Not much had changed between them.

Iain’s fingertips had grown so hard he could not feel the softness of her skin even in those secret places she had rescued from the wind. In those first moments, just inside the door and stooping beneath the low ceiling of the house, his thumb dug deep inside the neckline of her dress but the pads on his paws were too hard to savour her smoothness.

“You’re back,” she said.

“Yes.”

The moment was a hinge. It swung open to who knew where. A view of the bay. The midnight sun. A sail on the horizon.

“When?”

“Lerwick. Yesterday,” he said.

“How?”

“A whaler heading North.”

“Why?”

He pulled a sour face. “You’re full of questions.”

“Your mother’s dead,” she said.

“I knew.” His face grew calm.

The house smelled of the land and sheep and women but there was only Flora and the sheep.

“Five years ago. In February,” she said.

Five years before Iain laid up in Surabaya whilst in a short gloaming of grey sleet his mother ceased. More washing, folding, more dirt to delve. And relief.

“Well?” Flora said.

He embraced her again for he had not held a woman in a while and Flora was his wife and might expect it of him. His thumb slipped once more beneath the neckline of her dress and guessed, and kissed. A loving cup of herring and tobacco, oatmeal and tatties, whisky. He remembered his still-soft and hungry hands thwarted by the sheath of bundling cloth and their faces touching and her breath like a summer breeze.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, remembering herself. “There’s broth in the pot.”

“I’d like to bathe,” he said, looking towards the tin bath on its nail.

His mother bathed him - not often (it was not their way) but in the summer months. He would stand naked in the puddle of warm water and let her wipe away smoke-grime and beach-tar and grass-stains until he was white and ruddy as a girl.

“A bath?” she queried.

“Aye.”

“I’ll fetch water,” she said after a hesitation.

He tapped his pipe out on the lintel.

“There’s driftwood stacked, Iain,” she said, and embraced him, her strong fingers raking over him to check he was no ghost. He smelled of salt and sweat and spirits. The sea had scarred his face and lined his eyes and leached the redness from his hair. His body startled her after all those years of absence like an unfinished sentence regained by a waking drunkard.

“Did you never write?” she asked, lifting the pail.

“I was never going to be much longer,” he said.

She nodded. He watched her walk across the field towards the burn. The peats had spilled from the creel onto green sward seasoned with broken shells and pebbles. The tattie-leaves were spotted and yellow-green too early in the year. She had not added furniture or ornaments to the house’s dark interior. If anything, the household was diminished. One life – enough for that and nothing more. And Iain should have a purse of coins to stack upon the splintering table. Aye, he should.

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He soaked like saltfish in a zinc bath before the fire.

Flora had watched him struggle out from boots and breeches, stand bare legged in long shirt tails, pipe still clamped in the moistness between thick moustache and tangled beard.

“You’ll get your shirt wet. Take it off,” she had said.

He had pulled the rough shirt over his head. Muscle twisted about his shoulders. Scars, livid under-linings or faded scribbles, hinted untold anecdotes. The dark fur on his chest and belly faded into the pale fankle of flesh between his thighs. His legs were hard. He sat down in the bath and soaked. She watched.

“So tell me,” Flora said.

“Tell you what?”

“Where you have been and what you did there?”

“How many stock have you?” he asked.

“Five ewes and seven hens,” she said.

“That all?”

“Yes.” And she noticed that he didn’t have a pack.

“I came from Montreal,” he said. “In a lumbertub that leaked like a collander. Cargo and crew soaked through with brine. Before that we sailed saltcod to the Indies and returned to St John’s laden with skreech. The fish to feed the negroes and the rum to console the Newfoundlandmen who salted the cod to feed the negroes who grew the cane to make the rum. Like a shuttle in a loom.”

“For seven years?”

“No. Not seven whole years. Wash me. Will you?”

As she soaped the cloth, the water soaked the cuff of her dress. It occurred to her to wonder what she had planned to do tomorrow. She wiped the flat surface of his back like a windowpane but could not see.

“You’re bigger than I remember,” she said.

“No,” he said. “Harder. Did she die easily?”

“Not really. It was a bad winter and it settled in her chest. She drowned, I think, in her bed. But slowly.”

“She drowned?”

“Aye.”

She had been going to sell some eggs in Sandness.

“Did I mention chickens? I have hens.”

“Hens too,” he said.

“A few.”

“But no man fishing?”

“No,” she said quickly and thought she would blush but didn’t. “Where did you get these scars?” she asked instead.

“Places. In the East Indies,” Iain said, “we used to bathe in the sea at the end of a rope. A fellow McBride got snapped up by a shark. One bite and half of him was gone. The bottom half. Six years ago that was. I held the rope for him. A frightful snatch and half of him vanished in the belly of a shark. He didn’t last two minutes on the deck. Looked comical. I haven’t bathed since then. Not in the sea. Not willingly.”

His knees were pulled up to his chin. The bones of his back peeked between taut slabs of muscle.

“The East Indies,” she said.

“Kalimantan. Surabaya. Selatan.”

“Queer names,” she said.

“And Mogadishu. Madagascar. Limpopo.”

“Limpopo?” she giggled.

“Montevideo. Curacao. Quebec,” Iain pronounced, smiling.

“I’ve heard of that. That’s Canada,” she said “You’ve been there, those places?”

“I got to those places. Some of them. I brought you red feathers,” he said.

“Feathers?”

“From a Scarlet Ibis.”

“What use are feathers?” she asked.

“Yes indeed,” he said. “Further down girl.”

“I’m not your girl,” Flora said.

Iain looked at her. Her face thrust forward to drag the weight she had been carrying.

“Remember the bundling?” he smiled.

“Yes.”

“And the wedding night?” he asked, remembering fiddles, firelight, the swirl of dancers.

“You passed out drunk, Iain”.

“Scrub,” he said.

“I wanna.”

“I’ve got to get clean, Flora. Clean like a bairn.”

“Then clean yourself,” she said

She rose and crossed to stir the soup that simmered on the fire.

“Half of him gone, in just that single bite. Ggnnygnn.” He gnashed his teeth and sucked on his pipe.

Her broth was always salty. Her mother's broth was fresher and, Iain supposed, her grannie's broth was fresher still. But Flora was generous with the seasoning. There was always more salt and the sea shrank back from the shore. Flora smiled. It reminded Iain of a vixen at a burn.

The pelt of red feathers lay on the rough tabletop, its vivid softness stirring in the draught.

“They’re bonny. Are they dyed?”

“No. Dead,” he said. “It’s salty.”

“How you like it,” Flora smiled.

The whisky he had supped earlier in the day had worn away into a weary ache like boots crunching on shingle.

“I wanted to see you,” he said.

“Come home, you mean, to bide?”

He supped his broth and wiped his beard. He couldn’t guess whether he was a shock or a fulfilment.

“Five ewes,” he said. “And hens.”

“There is still a boat. My uncle uses it.”

“I’m no richer,” he said.

“Aye.”

“Only the scars I stand in,” he smiled. “I’ve seen things though. I’ve no knack for accumulation, Flora.”

“Feathers,” she said.

“Aye. From a Scarlet Ibis.”

Flora turned her face to greet. Her teeth clenched on a haunch of disappointment, fat-slimed and ribbed and too raw to chew. Her life was barley strewn across the hearth. She should call in the hens and bid them mend this midden.

Iain watched the dirty weather of her grief comb across her shoulders in stifled sobs. His breath was shallow.

“We’ll pick it up,” he said.

She turned to wonder at him through red-rimmed eyes.

“Pick it up?” she wondered.

“I’d like to see her. My mother,” he said. He left the bowl half-empty at his place.

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At the burial ground the stones were all askew, grey-granite lichened soft but obdurate like teeth persisting in a dead ewe’s jaw. The turf on his mother’s lair had knitted back smoothing the sensuous wound of grit and fibre.

She washed his body clean. The warm water painted in the contours of his back, his buttocks, his thighs growing briar-dark with tangling hair. She was bundled now herself in sod. At first, his mind shrank back from the vision of her earth-stained bones. And when he stiffened his resolve to look, he wanted lapis lazuli - vermilion - murex violet. He wished himself a merchant in some souk, a trafficker in shades and radiances, selling indigo or cochineal from heaped baskets. Just for her - a purse of colour from beyond the grey horizon. Back from the sea and barely fit to stand, he wished the warm water were trickling from her sponge.

McBride lay comical upon the scrubbed grey deck.

“Legless again,” they joked. And then he died.

And soft girls, slim girls, plump girls dark as fishermen soaped and soothed  
Iain's body and wondered that he did not stir.

Iain gazed upon his mother's grave. The wind stirred and a gull cried. The  
sea rose and reached and failed to find a purchase on the pitted slabs.

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It was an hour to the burial ground and back but he was gone for nearer three.

The solstice-sun was dipping down towards the sea but would not sink. It  
rested one moment on the ocean's level then rose again, an overstaying guest.

Flora picked up the pelt of feathers from the board and placed them in the kist  
on cream white linen. The feathers seemed like blood on a sheet, a stain that would  
stay forever fresh. She stroked the intricate soft down. It shone. No northern gull  
could bear such an extravagance.

"What did you squander?" she wondered.

She slipped her hand beneath the sheets and pillowcases to touch the dried  
broom and the bundling sheet. The broom pricked her fingers but she did not bleed.  
She drew her hand back. It hovered over the compacted promises.

"Never mind. You're home. Whatever that means," she muttered. "Time to  
begin."

"Begin what?" he asked from the doorway. Behind him the sun pressed low  
against the sea but held itself in refusal, pale and orange.

"What's that?" she asked.

"A fiddle," he said. "I hid it in the byre."

"You hid a fiddle in the byre? When?"

“This afternoon when you were cutting peat. It has a good tone, I think.”

“You think?”

“Well, I don’t play,” he said. “I never learned.”

“Then why have you brought a fiddle?” she asked.

“I thought you’d sell it. It’s worth something. Latvian. I bought the thing in Leith.”

He plinked a brief apology on its string.

“Feathers and a fiddle, Iain?”

“Aye. Her plot’s tidy. And a nice stone. Thank you.”

“It’s not going to get dark,” she said.

“No.”

“You must be tired. You walked a ways,” she said.

“Shall we go to bed, d’you think?”

“To bed?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Both of us?”

“Of course.”

She said, “Lay the fiddle here.”

He placed the fiddle in the kist, dense and fragile on the folded linen. Flora looked down on it and wondered what comfort it might be in the gales of winter.

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His hands stroked up the nightdress from her hips, his fingers scrubbed like terriers.

“Still bundled up in linen, Flora?”

A memory of something (and it wasn’t love) stirred in her and she turned into him, opening up to the hard scab of his body.

Afterwards, she lay and wept. He lay and snored. The cottage was full of daylight as though anyone might come. But no-one did. She lay and wondered what secrets lay behind his eyes like foreign coins in the depths of some inner pocket. She wondered for a while and then she slept.

In the morning he was gone and so was the fiddle.

The feathers remained, a jeering stain on her wedding linen.

At first she wondered if he had gone to walk. She wondered if he had gone to mend the boat or pile rocks back onto the tumbled dyke. Perhaps he was watching his ewes or just the weather, dense now with coming rain, tacking across the bright horizon like a manoeuvring fleet.

Flora waited. Then she marched along the shore as far as the burial ground. Her body still sang from the queer vivid excitements of their tugging. The boulders were black and slippery with kelp.

He wasn't there. The turf upon his mother's grave was torn. Grit and broken mussel-shells shone in the gouged injury. She surveyed the sweep of the bay but could not see him.

She threw the feathers in the midden - just as well.

The year had turned upon its heel and now walked back towards the winter. Flora wondered if she had conceived and how she might explain it at the kirk. They would have seen him walking yesterday, she told herself. They would know of him.

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She tramped as far as Sellaness. He heard of it years later as they lay in bunks out-bound from Montreal, island men like sheep dogs broken in their loyalties, picking through the driftwood of their lives. Dried fishheads. Broken puffins.

No sign of him. No use. The word she sent flew no faster than a man could walk or a ship sail. He paused in Lerwick looking for a ship but not for long.