

Inspector Jack Gannet drove into Saltsea-on-Sea along the coast road. Today's sun (not that he believed it to be a new one every day) was already climbing merrily in the sky. It was a beautiful morning. Shame it was about to be spoilt by the *Lucky Lady* and her cargo - one very unlucky lady. One very dead lady. Jack Gannet sighed, this job didn't get any easier. Jack Gannet had been in the force longer than he cared to remember. He was a straightforward, old-fashioned kind of detective. He had no strange tics or eccentricities - he didn't do cross-words, he wasn't Belgian, he certainly wasn't a woman. He was a man suited to his profession. What he wasn't, was happy. He didn't want to be dealing with a dead body on a glorious morning like this. Especially not on an empty stomach.

Madame Astarti didn't know about the dead body yet. She was having some trouble opening her

eyes. They were glued shut by sleep and mascara and one too many gins in The Crab and Bucket last night with Sandra and Brian. Madame Astarti sighed and groped blindly around on her bedside table for her lighter and a packet of Player's No.6 and inhaled deeply on a cigarette. She loved the smell of nicotine in the morning.

Seagulls were clog-dancing on the roof above her head, heralding a brand new day in Saltsea-on-Sea. Through a gap in the curtains she could see that the sun was the colour of egg-yolks. Sunrise, she thought to herself, a little daily miracle. It would be funny, wouldn't it, if it didn't happen one morning? Well, probably not very funny at all really because everything on earth would die. The really big sleep.

• 1972 •

Blood and Bone

MY MOTHER IS A VIRGIN. (TRUST ME.) MY MOTHER, NORA – A FIERY Caledonian beacon – says she is untouched by the hand of man and is as pure as Joan of Arc or the snow on the Grampians. If you were asked to pick out the maiden in a police line-up of women (an unlikely scenario, I know) you would never, ever, choose Nora.

Am I then a child of miracle and magic? Were there signs and portents in the sky on the night I was born? Is Nora the Mother of God? Surely not.

On my birth certificate it states that I was born in Oban, which seems an unlikely place for the second coming. My beginning was always swaddled in such mist and mystery by Nora that I grew up thinking I must be a clandestine princess of the blood royal (true and blue), awaiting the day when I could come safely into my inheritance. Now it turns out that things are more complicated than that.

I am twenty-one years old and I am (as far as I know, for we can be sure of nothing it seems), Euphemia Stuart-Murray. Effie, for Nora's sister, who drowned in a river on the day that I was born. Nora herself was just seventeen when I entered the material world. A child looking after a child, she says.

These Stuart-Murrays are strangers to me, of course. As a child I had no kindly grandfather or playful uncles. Nora has never visited a brother nor spoken wistfully of a mother. Even their name is new to me, for all of my life Nora and I have gone by the more prosaic 'Andrews'. And if you cannot trust your name to be true then what can you trust? For all she has acknowledged her family – or vice versa – my mother may as well have washed ashore on a scallop shell, or sprung fully formed from some wrathful god's head, her veins running with ichor.

The closest Nora ever came to talking about any family until now was to claim that we were descended from the same line as Mary Stuart herself and the dead Scottish queen's flaws had followed us down the generations, particularly, Nora said, her bad judgement where men were concerned. But then, I doubt that this is a trait exclusive to Mary Queen of Scots, or even the Stuart-Murrays.

I have come home – if you can call it that, for I have never lived here. My life is all conundrums. I am as far west as I can be – between here and America there is only ocean. I am on an island in that ocean – a speck of peat and heather pricked with thistles, not visible from the moon. My mother's island. Nora says it is not her island, that the idea of land ownership is absurd, not to mention politically incorrect. But, whether she likes it or not, she is empress of all she surveys. Although that is mostly water.

We are not alone. The place is overrun with hardy Scottish wildlife, the thick-coated mammals and vicious birds that have reclaimed the island now that the people have all left it for the comfort of the mainland. Nora, ever a widdershins kind of

woman, has made the journey in reverse and left the comfort of the mainland to settle on this abandoned isle. When we say the mainland we do not always mean the mainland, we often mean the next biggest island to this one. Thus is our world shrunk.

Nora, a perpetual *déraciné*, the Wandering Scot, a diaspora of one (two if you count me), spent the years of my childhood in exile from her native land, flitting from one English seaside town to the next as if she was in the grip of some strange cartographical compulsion to trace the coastline step by step. Anyone observing us would have thought we were on some kind of permanent holiday.

I used to wonder if, long ago, Nora began her journey in Land's End and was trying to get to John o'Groats, although for what reason I couldn't imagine – unless it was because she was Scottish, but then many Scots live their whole lives without ever finding it necessary to go to John o'Groats.

Now she says she will die here, but she is only thirty-eight years old, surely she is not ready to die yet? Nora says that it doesn't matter when you die, that this life is nothing but an illusion. Maybe that's true, but it doesn't stop the cold rain from soaking us to the skin or the gales blowing in our hair. (We are truly weathered here.) Anyway, I don't believe that Nora will ever die, I think she will merely change state. It has begun already, she is being transformed into an elemental creature, with tidal blood and limestone bones. She is unevolving, retiring into the ancient, fishy regions of her brain. Perhaps soon she will crawl back into the watery realm of Poseidon and reclaim her Saurian ancestry. Or metamorphose into something monumental – an

ice-capped ben, littered with granite boulders, or a tumbling, peat-brown burn, bubbling to the sea with its cargo of elvers and fry and frothy green weed.

I am bound to the unknown and neglected Stuart-Murrays by spiralling tapeworms of genetic material. We are, dead and alive (but mostly dead, it seems), the glowing molecular dust of stars, a galactic debris of bacteria and germs. Our veins are the colour of delphiniums and lupins, our arterial blood a febrile brew of crushed geranium petals and hot-house roses, thinned with plasma like catarrh and—

~ Wheesht, says Nora, talk sense, our bloodline is that of ancient warriors, of berserkers and invaders. Our blood tastes of rusted weapons and hammered-out coins. We are not the sort, she says, who stoically slit their thin veins like reeds, and slip away quietly down their own bloodstream, we don our breast-plates and hack and hew and rive at our enemies.

The Stuart-Murrays, it seems, are even-handed – they have fought against the English and also stood shoulder to shoulder with them in support of Empire and exploitation. We are numbered amongst those wha' bled wi' Wallace and have been present at nearly every rammy, stushie and stramash in Scotland's tortured history.

And where are they now, these feckless Stuart-Murrays? The line, Nora says, will end in daughters. Or, to be more precise – me. I am, it seems, the last daughter of the house of Stuart-Murray.

I am a young woman composed of blood and flesh, sugar and spice, all things nice and the recycled molecules of the dead. I have thin bones that snap and shatter too easily for my liking. I

have Nora's narrow insteps and broad toes, her love of sentimental music, her hatred of Brussels sprouts. I have my mother's temperamental hair – hair that usually exists only in the imagination of artists and can be disturbing to see on the head of a real woman. On Nora it is the colour of nuclear sunsets and of over-spiced gingerbread, but on me, unfortunately, the same corkscrewing curls are more clownish and inclined to be carrotty.

I also have my mother's native tongue, for we led such an isolated life when I was a child that I speak with her accent, even though I never set foot in her country until I was eighteen years old.

Some people spend their whole lives looking for themselves, yet our self is the one thing we surely cannot lose (how like a cheap philosopher I am become, staying in this benighted place). From the moment we are conceived it is the pattern in our blood and our bones are printed through with it like sticks of seaside rock. Nora, on the other hand, says that she's surprised anyone knows who they are, considering that every cell and molecule in our bodies has been replaced many times over since we were born.

Some people say that we are nothing more than a bundle of perceptions, others claim that we are composed entirely out of our memories. My earliest memory is of drowning – like my mother, I am clearly drawn to the dark side. Perhaps I am a living, breathing example of reincarnation – perhaps the drowning Effie's spirit leapt out of her body and into my newborn one?

~ Let's hope not, Nora says.

Memory is a capricious thing, of course, belonging not in the world of reason and logic, but in the realm of dreams and photographs – places where truth and reality are tantalizingly out

of reach. For all I know I have imagined this aquatic memory, as insubstantial as water itself – or remembered a nightmare and thought it real. But then, what is a nightmare if it isn't real?

Before she had a purpose (turning into landscape) Nora herself was always a distracted and absent-minded person. Mnemosyne's forgotten daughter. How else can you explain the obliteration of the Stuart-Murrays, not to mention the terrible circumstances of my birth?

We are walking along the puffin-populated cliffs that fall away into cold-boiling sea. Above our heads a succession of wheeling, screeching birds – kittiwakes, guillemots, gannets – are creating complex and unreadable auguries.

We can see almost the whole island from here – the big house where we stay, the bracken and heather and boggy peat and beyond, on the far side, the yellowing machair, home to rabbit and feral cat, the latter the terrifyingly ugly product of genetic isolation – animals descended from a pair of pet Siamese brought on holiday by some long-gone Stuart-Murrays. For this island, according to Nora, is the holiday home of our ancestors.

I have no reason to dispute this fact with her, although why anyone would want to holiday in this blighted place I cannot imagine. Even in high summer I expect there is an air of autumnal desolation about it. In winter, it is like a place that has been long-forgotten or never discovered at all. Nora says she remembers holidays here, remembers being a small child, dipping in and out of rock pools for little brown crabs and tiny tinsilver fish and eating windswept picnics on the impoverished sea-salted grass of the lawn.

Nora is a woman with a past, a past she has always resolutely

refused to speak about, and you cannot imagine how strange it is to hear her talk about it now. It disturbs me more than it disturbs her, for she has carried it in her head all these years, whereas for me it is a newly opened box of frights and wonders.

Nora says that we shall wrap ourselves in shawls and blankets like a pair of old, cold-boned spinsters (Euphemia and Eleanora) and sit by the cracking flames of a driftwood fire and spin our stories. When she spills her own tale into the silence for me, she says, it will be a tale so strange and tragic that I shall think it wrought from a lurid and overactive imagination rather than a real life.



~ Hurry, hurry, Nora urges, we must get on, we must tell our tales. How will you begin? she asks. *A lone fisherman up early looking for sea trout . . . ?* And will it be real? Or will you make it up as you go along?

~ Will you excise the tedium of everyday life – the humdrum of kettles boiled, toilets flushed, curtains drawn, doorbells rung, telephones answered, the skin shed, the nails grown, and so on (ad infinitum, ad nauseam)? Do we really, she asks, want to listen to the prolixity of petty marital disputes over the cat, the lawnmower, the bottle of blood red wine?

~ Nor, says Nora, do we want commonplace tales of *Hausfrau Angst*, of the woman heroically making over her life with a handsome new lover, a beautiful child, a happy ending. Instead, we shall have murder and mayhem, plots and sub-plots, a mad woman in the attic, purloined diamonds, lost birthrights, heroic dogs, a soupçon of sex, a suspicion of philosophy.

Very well. I shall begin at an arbitrary moment just over a month ago (how much longer it seems). The season is winter, it is always winter. Nora is the very queen of winter.

The place is the land of cakes, the city of the three Js, the home of the Broons, the schoolyard of the Bash Street Kids and William Wallace, the kailyard of Scottish journalism, Juteopolis – Dundee!

Dundee. A place far, far away in the magical north country, whence I got my nature but not my nurture. ‘The North’ – that magic road sign with its promise of ice floes and Eskimos, polar bears and the aurora borealis. Dundee – land of outlandish street names – Strawberrybank, Peep o’Day Lane, Shepherd’s Loan, Magdalen Yard Green, Small’s Wynd, Brown Constable Street, Bonnybank Road.

Dundee – built on the solidified magma and lava of an extinct volcano, Dundee with its crumbling, muddy-sandstone tenements, impenetrable accent, appalling diet and its big, big estuary sky. Bonny Dundee, where the great Tay broadens into the firth, carrying with it salmon, sewage, the molecules of the watery dead, perhaps even of Nora’s sister, beautiful Effie, who drowned on the day that I was born, swept downstream like a dead fish.

~ Just get a move on, Nora says.