10

DYKING

THE SKY GETS BIGGER AS the train travels further north. The temperature changes in inverse correlation, and for each leg of the journey – London, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Orkney – I put on another layer of clothing.

I posted the keys to my bedsit through the letterbox of the pub, dragged my suitcase onto the bus and got to King's Cross early in the morning. I'm not settled until the train pulls away from the station and we are in motion. Although I've got good at negotiating the booking websites to find the cheapest fares, the journey is expensive and will take a whole day. I could have flown to any European capital in a shorter time and for less money. I sleep a lot on the train, waking every half-hour to pins and needles and new geography. Other passengers get off at their destinations – Peterborough, Durham, Newcastle – but I keep going north. Somewhere after Berwick upon Tweed, there's a rush of light into the

carriage as the sky and sea open up. I'm in Scotland but not even halfway home.

After Edinburgh, we cross the Forth Rail Bridge and pass through Dundee. Getting the shorter ferry crossing from John O'Groats to Orkney would have meant staying overnight so today I get off the train in Aberdeen and don't have long to get from the station to the pier. Huge oil-industry ships are docked in the harbour and seagulls are hustling around. I'm rushing and crumpled, struggling with my luggage, but the sea air and a cold breeze hit me. It's been a while since I've tasted the wind like this. There's a sign saying 'Northern Isles Ferries' but I know the way. I board the boat at five o'clock to sail into the North Sea as night falls.

On-board, the ferry from Aberdeen to Orkney is kitted out to look like a hotel but cannot disguise the reality of its daily trips through the temperamental North Sea and retains the whiff of sick. The carpets are patterned to disguise vomit stains and the chairs are chained to the floor to stop them tumbling across the room in rough seas. When the captain announces over the intercom there might be a 'bit of chop', I know enough about Orcadian understatement to refrain from eating and swallow a travel-sickness tablet. I'd been told that if I was feeling seasick, I should hold my gaze on the horizon but right now I want to sleep.

I can't tell if people are drunk or if it's just the motion of the waves. I bed down under my jacket on the sea-rocked floor and watch a mother and son have an argument in sign language. Voices carry over the lounge in the Orcadian accent

I have not heard in months; it brings back schoolmates and neighbours. It's a Celtic lilt, vastly different from something like Glaswegian, somewhere between Welsh and Scandinavian, coy and almost sarcastic. Hearing the accent does not give me comfort but a jolt of anxiety and old feelings of not fitting in. I am too big and too English, remembering the sense of being trapped on 'the Rock', as frustrated teenagers call Orkney.

I buy a copy of the *Orcadian* from the bar and am interested in reading local news but at the same time don't want to bump into anyone I know. I am tatty and defeated, with bad skin and nerves. I don't want to have to admit that I've come back – that I've failed. I wonder if it's possible to really come back once you've lived away for a while, or if it's called coming 'home' when you never belonged.

I've been sober for a few months but I feel like a fraud accepting praise when people say 'well done' because I want to drink and feel it's impossible that I won't again. Yet I don't drink, day after day. Perhaps this is just how it is, I think, this daily battle and my small, careful life is what the so-called miracle is.

On my last trip home I spent the entire seven-hour ferry journey in the bar and had to be helped off the boat by strangers. This time, I am able to stand out on deck as the ferry arrives into Kirkwall around midnight, feeling the salty wind on my face as the lights of the harbour grow closer in the night. When Mum meets me I see her relief.

In the car on the way to her house, I remember how, when Tom and I were small, Mum would reach back when she was

driving and hold our ankles to reassure herself we were still there. Even now she does it sometimes.

Mum now lives in Kirkwall, Orkney's main town, in the large bungalow she bought after the sale of the farmhouse. She lets rooms to lodgers but tonight there is one free for me. Although the house contains furniture, pictures and crockery from the farmhouse, I have never lived there and it's not my home. When we get back, Mum makes me a cup of tea and we sit at the big wooden kitchen table that our family of four used to eat around at the farm.

Once a month, around full moon, Mum goes to the Bay of Skaill as a volunteer to help with the RSPB's beached-birds survey. She walks the high-tide line, looking for, identifying and counting dead birds. The findings give information about disease, food shortages or oil spills, although she doesn't usually find much, a good sign. A couple of days after I arrive back, I join her. As we walk, we look across the bay to the farm – this is the closest Mum goes, these days. We find one dead fulmar, one dead cormorant and one dead sheep.

Mum drives back to Kirkwall and I walk up along the coast to the farm from the beach and notice, as they taught me to in the treatment centre, my feelings about the place: the surge of affection as the buildings come into view. The people who live in the farmhouse are no longer my family but this is where I come from and it's special to me.

Dad is here, although most nights he stays with his girlfriend. I'm thinking about everything that has happened when I sit down by the freezer, then decide to walk up to the Outrun. In his caravan, Dad tells me about the tremors and we go together to feed the Highland cattle.

I stay at Mum's for a few weeks, sleeping a lot, looking at job websites, signing on the dole and attending a few AA meetings in Kirkwall. Mum gets the worst of me. She is supportive and good-natured but I'm irritable. In Orkney I revert to a surly teenager. I know she is pleased that I'm not drinking but I don't want to discuss it, as if this would be to admit I had made some wrong choices in the past or that she was right.

Soon after I arrive back, there are storms. Although life in the town is different from at the farm – there are trees in the garden and we're more sheltered – Mum's house is still noisy in the wind. The daylight hours are short and I often sleep into them. At Christmas, I take a trip to Manchester to visit my brother and his pregnant wife. Life is carrying on and I return to Orkney, knowing that I need to do more with myself than just not drinking.

In storms last month, conditions – including hurricane-force northerly winds and water-logged earth – were such that sections of drystone dyke made of huge grey slabs, which had stood through gales for 150 years, collapsed all over the farm.

The morning after one storm, I walk along the shore, looking

for driftwood or treasure. I find one unusual piece of flotsam: a seal, on the other side of the fence from the sea, perhaps carried by a huge wave. A young straggler, blown off course.

I've washed up on this island again, nine months sober, worn down and scrubbed clean, like a pebble. I'm back home, at the end of a rough year, in the winds that shaped me and where the sea salt left me raw. I've got a fresh start but I'm not sure what to use it for, so I'm going to make myself useful, building walls in the short hours of daylight and staying in a caravan at night.

After fifty-four days when it rained each day, with only eight hours of sunshine in the whole of December, there were some magical days in January: dreamy sunsets reflected on calm sea. Mum drops me off at the farm with my bags and I feel pleased to have something useful to do. Dad has shown me in the past how to build drystone dykes. It's slow work. A dyke is actually two walls, built to be flat on the outer faces, joined at the top by large linking stones and filled in the middle with smaller loose ones. Although repairing a broken-down section is easier than building from nothing, it's not breezeblock mindlessness: I have constantly to visualise and discriminate. I select and estimate the odd-shaped stones for shape and size, forming a unique 3D jigsaw that has to last.

The stones are heavy and ancient, and modern technology seems flimsy. I carry a digital camera and a lump hammer. When I crouch behind the wall to smoke, I watch the sun's short journey across the southern sky, over the Bay of Skaill and the hills of Hoy before it falls below the Atlantic horizon

and I can no longer see my stones. I start to think in decades and centuries rather than days and months. I think about the people who built the original dykes, when the farms employed many more workers, and I wonder if my part will stay standing for as long. I have flitted and drifted but I want my wall to be permanent.

In the fading light the farm is timeless and two huge horses appear, like time travellers, out of the mist. When I was a kid, there were the bones of working horses down by the shore, left where they were shot by farmers forced to replace them with tractors. In 'Horses', the Orcadian poet Edwin Muir imagined strange horses coming back to the landscape after a future apocalyptic event. These two Clydesdales graze Dad's cliff fields; like in the poem, they have returned.

When it's finally built, the last big 'coping stones' lifted on top to bind the two sides of the wall together, I lie on the dyke on my back and let my head hang over the end. Upside down, I view the sky as if I am looking down on it. It seems deep and wide rather than a two-dimensional arc, with cloud paths stretching out into the earth's atmosphere.

I'm learning to identify clouds, cloud-spotting in the same way that others bird-watch. The international cloud-classification system defines clouds by genera, species and variety, using Latin names. The high wispy clouds are called cirrus and the ones in the shape of a fish skeleton are called vertebratus. Stratus, the

grey, featureless sheet of a cloud we often have at this time of year, is known as opacus or translucidus, depending on whether the sun is visible through it. One afternoon, I spot some rare lenticular cloud, formed by the wind into cigar shapes.

I become interested in a fairly recently discovered meteorological phenomenon: noctilucent cloud, literally 'night shining', the highest and one of the rarest types, drifting in the upper atmosphere. Unlike most cloud it is made of ice crystals rather than water droplets. It's usually invisible but just after sunset around midsummer, in 'deep twilight', the tilt of the earth allows it to catch the last light of the sun.

Sometimes known as 'space cloud', its first recorded observation was in 1885, two years after the eruption of Krakatoa. It could be that the ice crystals have formed around specks of dust – from volcanoes, meteors or space-shuttle exhausts. I like the idea of pollution creating something beautiful.

Despite the absurdity of classifying the ever-changing clouds, trying to define the sky like this opens up new ways of thinking to me: of the beauty of Orkney's highly changeable climate, of rain as simply the decay of a cloud.

Just as these islands seem impossible when I'm in London, friends online talking about Japanese restaurants, new bars and the tube at rush-hour now seem preposterous. My fingernails are dirty, my lips chapped from the wind.

I'm repairing these dykes at the same time as I'm putting myself back together. I am building my defences, and each time I don't take a drink when I feel like it, I am strengthening new pathways in my brain. I have to break the walls down a bit more

before I can start to build them up again. I have to work with the stones I've got and can't spend too long worrying if I'm making the perfect wall. I just have to get on with placing stones.

One night in the caravan, the weather turns wild again. Although it is well weighted down, the thin walls tremble and the wind and hail are crashing against the windows. It's like being at sea.

I have drinking dreams. I'm so thirsty. Each night brings up flashes of locations I had forgotten: the floor of a train, somehow under a table of four strange men, not sure if I was being sick; a small town in Spain, late at night, knocking on random doors trying to find what I thought was a nightclub; in London, crying on a pavement underneath a cash machine, ringing on my ex's buzzer in the middle of the night, unwanted; waking with someone in my bed who hadn't been there when I'd passed out. I wish none of it had happened.

Half awake, I have a sensory flashback, as I often do when trying to sleep, of the night I was arrested when the car swerved and hit the grass verge. After I moved out of our flat, I had come back to Orkney for a few weeks, heartbroken, to try to find some calm but it wasn't there. The police picked me up as I was passing the road leading to the cliffs of Yesnaby, which had become known as a local suicide spot. They had been alerted that I had gone out in a car, leaving two empty wine bottles, known to be terribly unhappy. They were waiting for me at the end of that road but I wasn't going to drive down it. I was

driving to the farm, crazed with sadness. All I wanted was to get home.

I was so drunk that I had to close one eye to see the lines in the middle of the road. At one point I hit the verge – a sickening clunk – but regained control of the car and straightened up. For some time I had felt as if I was turning over endless stones looking for a safe place but I couldn't find one. The drink offered the promise of ease but even that wasn't working. My body was rejecting it – I would be gagging but trying to force more down.

When I saw the blue lights I thought at first it was strange that an ice-cream van would be out in the countryside. When they got me – sadly, acceptingly – into the back of the police car, I said, 'I didn't want to hurt anyone else.'

Trying to sleep in the wind-rocked caravan, the muscle memory of the car hitting the verge keeps jolting through my mind and body. Dropping off to sleep, I'm jolted awake. My car keeps swerving off the road.

Despite everything that has happened – the drink-driving conviction, giving up my job to undergo the programme and sort out my alcohol problem, all the pain my drinking has caused me, all that I have lost and all that I stand to gain through quitting – the thought of and desire for a drink still comes through me regularly, like an electric shock: when I hear a good song, or the sun comes out, or I feel angry, or I want to phone someone

and tell them something nice. Alcohol is woven into nearly every area of my life and it will take some time to untangle and develop new responses and strategies. It takes a while to build a strong wall.

I've lived in ten different houses in the last five years. My belongings are in friends' attics and garages in London – a physical manifestation of my unsettledness and split loyalties. I am scattered and never at home. I think about having a drink like you might fantasise about having an affair. I know I can't do it, but maybe if the conditions were perfect and nobody would find out, we could have a weekend together, my bottles and I.

Each evening when I take off my overalls and work gloves, I hide in the glow of my laptop and don't drink. I want to drink but I have hope that something inside me will change. I'm back under these decaying clouds and deep skies, living among the elements that made me. I want to see if these forces will weigh me down, like coping stones, and stop the jolting.