

From the author of *VERA* and *SHETLAND*

Ann Cleeves

OFFSHORE

A short story collection



Ann Cleeves

OFFSHORE
A short story collection

Macmillan

Contents

[The Secrets of Soil](#)

(featuring DI Willow Reeves)

[The Writer-in-Residence](#)

(featuring DI Jimmy Perez)

[The Spinster](#)

(featuring DI Jimmy Perez)

[Stranded](#)

[The Soothmothers](#)

(featuring DI Jimmy Perez)

[Hector's Other Woman](#)

(featuring DI Vera Stanhope)

[The Pirate](#)

[Postcard from Skokholm by Lynne Chitty](#)

(featuring George and Molly Palmer-Jones)

[*Thin Air*](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[About the Author](#)

[By Ann Cleeves](#)

The Secrets of Soil

The phone call from my father woke me from a deep sleep. It was past midnight and my first thought was that my mother was dead. She'd been ill for a while.

'Willow, you need to come.' A pause. 'Please.' He'd lived in North Uist for thirty years, but hadn't lost the posh voice. He'd never asked for my help before.

'Is it Lottie?' We Balranald kids had been taught to call our parents by their first names. One of the many things that set us apart.

'No, not Lottie.' Another hesitation. 'Just come. Get the first plane to Benbecula. I'll meet you there.'

Peter was waiting in the airport building, thin as a scarecrow with long, grey hair. Looking at his face, I saw how similar we were. In thirty years I'd have the same bony face, and my hair was already as dry as hay. We drove across the causeway to North Uist. The week before had been unseasonably stormy, but now it was sunny, so the landscape looked drenched in melted butter. Light reflected from the water that's everywhere in the islands, and from the iris beds and the flat machair, yellow with rattle, bird's-foot trefoil and little wild pansies. I waited for my father to speak. He'd dragged me here; let him make the first move. The van bounced across a cattle grid and towards the house where I'd spent my childhood.

I remember the place as being full of life. People always came and went in the commune. Students arrived in the summer, attracted by my father's writing about peace, love and self-sufficiency. Damaged, screwed-up and idealistic people drifted in, looking for salvation or a free bed. But it was hard work feeding so many people, keeping the place warm and watertight, and most packed their rucksacks and hitched to the ferry at Lochmaddy after a week or two. Now the place seemed lifeless. The tyre-swing, hanging from a rafter in the barn, was still there, but no kids played on it. Only my parents remained, held to the land by memories of its glory days, by my father's stubbornness and their failure to make any financial plans for retirement.

Peter switched off the engine and jumped out. 'Follow me.' He could be charming to strangers and journalists, but never to me. My decision to join the police service – the ultimate rebellion for a commune kid – had fractured our relationship beyond repair. We walked down the track towards the dunes, past the strip-fields where barley and oats grew. Everywhere, noise: corn buntings, snipe and lapwings protecting their young. Despite myself, I loved being there again.

He stopped sharply where the dunes slipped down towards the bay. The shore was washed clean by the gales, and I could see where he'd been with the ancient tractor, raking up seaweed to fertilize the light shell-soil. 'Look.'

There was an overhang in the dunes – the recent wind had eroded them, making wave-shaped sculptures held together by marram roots. A hand reached out of the sand. A skeleton. No flesh. Peat preserves bodies, but sand allows for decay. The bones were perfect, the fingers intact. It could have

been a sculpture too. There are no ground-predators in Uist to disturb a body.

I realized that I'd been expecting this since the phone call in the middle of the night and my father's urgent summons. If my mother wasn't dead, then John Ash had come back to haunt me.

He was one of the wanderers, the sad and the lonely boys who came to Balranald for comfort or escape. He turned up late one night. I think he'd walked from the ferry, which is miles away. Lottie had taken to him at once. I was her only child, and as strong and stubborn as my father. An ugly cuckoo in her nest. John was soft and brown-eyed. He was the companion Lottie had always wanted, dependent and pliable. And I'd killed him.

I crouched on the sand and looked more closely at the hand. On one finger there was a silver ring, loose because there was no flesh to hold it. It was tarnished now, but I knew that it would be engraved with a Celtic pattern, Lottie's trademark. She still made jewellery to sell at Taigh Chearsabhagh, the arts centre in Lochmaddy, and she'd handed out these rings to her favourites. I stood up and turned to my father. The beach was empty, but it was a fine day and soon somebody would be along to walk a dog or take photographs of the gulls. 'Why did you call me?'

'I didn't know what else to do.' Another first. My father was famous for his certainty.

'When did you find him?'

'Last night. I waited until your mother was asleep before I phoned you.'

He looked at me and I saw again how old he was. When John Ash arrived at Balranald that summer Peter had been at the height of his powers. He'd just published *The Secrets of Soil* and it had become an unexpected bestseller. The commune was thriving. Three families lived and worked there, beside the hangers-on. Peter was living the dream, cultivating the machair in the old-fashioned way. He was an authentic crofter who happened to be articulate, educated and good-looking. Charismatic. And, like all gurus, he had his disciples. John had travelled a long way to seek him out and worship him.

It was humid and thundery the day of John's arrival, midges swarming over the boggy ground near the house. I was in the kitchen with Lottie when he knocked at the door. He stumbled over the step, exhausted, and Lottie reached out to steady him. I was seventeen then and red-faced after days in the sun, difficult and desperate to fly the nest. John was in his early twenties, a frail university dropout who'd lost touch with his parents. Lottie loved pretty things, and John was very pretty. She took to him immediately, and Peter always needed admirers, so John joined the commune as wide-eyed believer, farm labourer and surrogate son.

From the start I hated his vulnerability, the way he tried so hard to please us. I made no attempt to hide my contempt, but John seemed not to notice. One afternoon I was in the barn, swinging on the tyre like a kid, when he declared himself in love with me. He stuttered over the words. *I've never met anyone like you.* It was all I could do not to laugh. Later I wondered if his infatuation was feigned, to anchor himself into our community. Perhaps he was like all the other drifters – there for the free bed. But I don't think he was that calculating. Recently I found one of the poems he'd written to me. It was childish, embarrassing, but strangely moving. My parents would have served him better by sending him to a shrink.

On Friday nights I started going to the Lochmaddy Hotel. The public bar was a rough place of underage drinking and fights. The noise spilled out across the bay and I'm not sure how the tourists who stayed in the guest rooms got any sleep. John hated it, but sometimes he tagged along, an irritating shadow. One evening in late summer there was live music and the place was heaving before we arrived. Donald, the butcher's son, was already steaming. When I went to the bar, he put his arm around me and tried to kiss me. If I'd been alone I'd have sworn and pushed him away, but suddenly I wanted to hurt John, to humiliate him, so I pulled Donald to me and kissed him again, very hard. The whole room cheered.

'I think we should go,' John said. 'I'll phone Peter for a lift.'

‘Go yourself!’ I stroked Donald’s cheek. I knew that John wouldn’t dare ask Peter to fetch him unless I was there too. Let him walk. I carried on drinking and flirting and laughing with the rest of the crowd.

Donald offered to drive me home. He was with some other boys and they all piled into a second car. Donald sobered up a bit when he got outside, and we set off first. All the way down the road the two cars chased and jostled, flashing their headlights and hitting their horns. Bored young men desperate for any excitement they could get. We were almost at Balranald when we saw John walking ahead of us. As we passed him, Donald wound down the window to jeer and I joined in.

I didn’t see what happened next. We were already round the corner near the cattle grid that led to our house. There was a horrible screech of brakes behind us, shouts. Donald stopped too and I got out and began to run, not towards the scene of the incident, but in the other direction. Home. Panicked and ashamed.

We never saw John again. My parents didn’t seem too troubled by his sudden disappearance. He was just another young helper who’d found the island life too hard. Lottie blamed me for rejecting him with so little sensitivity: ‘You drove him away.’

And when I imagined the incident, that was how I saw it: John, hurt by my cruelty, standing deliberately in the path of the oncoming car. The ultimate escape. I suppose it could have been an accident, but I left the island a week later to start college and never spoke to Donald or his friends about it. I didn’t want to know the details. There was no news about an injured young man on the Balranald road, so I could convince myself that John had been unharmed, that he *had* left for an easier life. Until now. Until the wind cut into the dunes and exposed his grave.

‘What should we do?’

‘What you should have done as soon as you found him,’ I said. ‘Call the police.’

‘I’ve already done that.’ Peter looked at me strangely, and I thought he knew more about John’s disappearance than he’d let on at the time. Of course there would have been rumours. It’s impossible to keep secrets in the islands. ‘I called *you*.’

‘Tell the local police.’ I stood up, my feet slithering through the soft sand. ‘He might have a family. He deserves a proper burial.’

‘Will they be able to identify him?’

‘Probably. Dental records. And the ring will link him with Lottie.’

And the soil, I thought, would tell its own story. There might be a belt buckle, buttons, hair. If Donald and his friends had used their own spades to dig the makeshift grave, there could be traces of peat from cuttings on their blackland. Their families hadn’t crofted the machair in the old way.

My father looked at me. ‘What will you do?’

‘What I should have done then. Tell the police what I know.’

He frowned. ‘It seems pointless, this digging around in the past.’

Then I saw that I’d been wrong about John’s disappearance. The boys who’d knocked him down would have left him where he was. They wouldn’t have bothered to haul his body down the track to the dunes. Once they’d realized he was dead, their instinct would have been like mine, to run. Peter had heard the racket that night and gone out to investigate. *He’d* buried John in the sand. A way of saving Balranald’s reputation.

‘I didn’t see what happened,’ I said, ‘I wasn’t in the car that hit him and I won’t speculate.’ It was the most I could promise.

My father turned away and I saw, as a sudden revelation, that he’d hidden John Ash to protect me, not himself. He must have cared about me, after all, in those strained days of my adolescence. I reached out and touched his shoulder, then walked off through the yellow light and the birdsong to make the call.

The Writer-in-Residence

It started to snow as I got off the plane: a few flurries, the flakes white against the dark sky. It was mid-afternoon, but that far north, night comes early. Sumburgh airport is very small, and arriving passengers walk across the tarmac to reach the terminal. Today a gusting northerly breeze tugged at our clothes and made us hurry inside. The runway stretches out towards the sea at both ends and is exposed whichever way the wind blows. There is no escaping from the water in Shetland.

By the time I'd picked up the hire car there was a blizzard, snowflakes as big as feathers floating against the windscreen. I hadn't met anyone I knew on the plane or in the airport and that felt odd. In the old days, when I'd come to Shetland after a holiday or a few days away, there was always somebody who recognized me – a school friend or a neighbour of my parents. It was weird to drift in like a stranger, to collect my bag from the belt without a wave from a member of staff. I suppose that in ten years I'd changed. Who would recognize me now? I should have felt glad. The last thing I wanted was for my old life to catch up with me. That was why I'd kept away for so long. But it was strange all the same.

When I arrived at Scalloway, the street by the harbour was white and my little hire car slid towards the wall as I pulled in to park. The skid scared me, although no damage was done, and I found that I was shaking as I climbed out. It was quite dark now and the small town was quiet. All I could hear was the suck of the tide and the splash of water where the wind caught it. The key to the Bod was still in the envelope in which it had arrived at my Edinburgh flat. I stood, shivering in the snow, to pull it out of my bag.

Someone walked down the street towards me. A tall man dressed in a long black coat, which looked out of place here, where everyone wears anoraks or parkas. I watched him appear through the blizzard bareheaded and apparently oblivious to the snow. Easy, loping strides. The snowflakes looked very white where they rested on his dark, untidy hair. I waited anxiously, afraid of a confrontation, scared that the old hostilities would be ignited, reinvented over time. But he seemed preoccupied by his own thoughts. He gave a distracted wave – the least that politeness dictated in Shetland – and a mumbled greeting: 'Terrible weather for so early in the year!'

Then he walked on.

Something about his frown was familiar, but he was a Shetlander, so it's possible that I knew him from my earlier life. He was no threat, and that was all that mattered. If I was going to be here for a month, I'd need to keep my paranoia at bay.

The Bod was warm inside. Someone had been in to switch on the heating and there was a pile of peat, in case I wanted to light the stove. Once it had been a boathouse and it stood on stilts right over the water. Small and wood-lined, there was one room, a combined study and kitchen downstairs, with a small shower room attached. The bed was in a loft reached by a narrow ladder. I had been to the Bod once before, to celebrate the publication of a collection of poetry. I had been eighteen and it had

seemed a rather grown-up thing to do, to attend a launch party. I'd written it up for an arts magazine, new venture set up by John Sinclair. He'd known then that he wouldn't stick at teaching for the rest of his career. We'd all crammed into the small space, sipping warm wine. The poet in residence then had been a small woman from the Ukraine. Old enough to be my grandmother, she'd drunk a bottle of wine all to herself and still stayed coherent. I never thought then that I'd be invited to stay in the place, that I'd be the soothmoother brought in to enrich the cultural life of the islands. I'd planned my life in quite a different way.

I'm not a poet. It's important to make that clear. Poets create works of the imagination. Their reality is different, more intense, not rooted in the prosaic. Their words sparkle and reflect like shards of ice in sunlight. My truth is solid and rooted in the mundane. I write fiction, but you could find my stories in any newspaper. A dead prostitute in a canal. An unfaithful wife strangled. A corrupt police officer. I have no interest in the beauty of words, only in their ability to describe clearly and accurately. And that clarity and accuracy are my trademark. It's why I'm famous and why, even before I've reached the age of thirty, I'm a wealthy woman.

So why am I here? Why have I agreed to spend a month as writer-in-residence, employed by Shetland Arts Trust (though no payment at all has been mentioned)? Because I have unfinished business in Shetland, and I refuse to let fear haunt me.

I climbed the ladder to the loft, dragging my bag behind me. I had brought very little. Unless it has changed a good deal, Shetland is not a place where it's important to impress with smart clothes. The Oxfam shop probably still does a good trade. And the essentials of my work – a computer and Internet access – had been provided for me. Part of the deal of the residency. The bed was low, hardly more than a futon, though it had a comfortable mattress. I lay down to try it out. There was a narrow window in the eaves, looking directly out to sea. The snow had stopped as suddenly as it had started and there was a thin moon and a scattering of stars, very bright. After living in the city, the intensity of the stars, the detail of the Milky Way, came as a surprise. In Shetland there is little light pollution.

Downstairs again, I switched on the kettle. The kitchen was well stocked. There was real coffee and a filter machine. In the fridge, white wine, and on the table a bottle of good French red. Shetlanders have become affluent and accustomed to the good things in life. How will they adapt to poverty if the oil stops flowing altogether? On the table there was also a note from John Sinclair, the arts officer: *Sorry I couldn't be at the airport to welcome you. Please make yourself at home and give me a shout if you need anything.* Then two telephone numbers – a landline and a mobile.

The kettle switched itself off, but I ignored it and opened the wine. There were bannocks from the Walls Bakery on the bench, and Shetland cheese, butter and milk in the fridge. Smoked salmon and smoked mussels. Slices of reestit mutton. John had done all he could to make me feel at home. After I'd drunk half the bottle I set it aside, out of my line of vision. It would be very easy to finish it all. It was only nine o'clock, but I'd been up early and I was tired, yet too restless to go to sleep. I stood at the window that made up the whole of one of the downstairs walls and looked out. It was triple-glazed but still I could feel the chill through the glass. The wind had dropped entirely. On the other side of the harbour the trawlers were covered in snow and looked ghostly in the moonlight. I turned back to the room and switched on the computer. My BlackBerry had no signal here and I wanted to check my emails. We were waiting for the TV adaptation of my first book to be given the green light, and my agent might have some news.

Broadband connected immediately. I ran through the messages quickly, deleting the spam that had got through the filter. Nothing from my agent or from the scriptwriter, who was as eager as I for the television project to proceed. As always, there were a couple of messages from readers, who'd reached me through my website. I reply to all these, even to the people who are shocked by my books and write to complain. I have a standard response: you know what's coming from the jacket and the first

page; nobody makes you read on. In fact the first letter was very positive and just contained a query about the publication date of the next book.

The final, unread message was entitled *Killer of the North*. This is the name of my latest novel. It's set in Gateshead on the River Tyne, and the title is a play on words. There's a famous piece of public art there called the *Angel of the North*, a giant sculpture that embraces visitors who approach the town by road or rail. I was expecting a review – either thanks for a tight and pacy story that kept the reader guessing until the final page or a rant about 'gratuitous violence'. But the message was very short and to the point: *Go home. You're not welcome here.*

No signature and no way to guess the identity of the writer. The address was simeon@shetnet.co.uk. Simeon was the name of the central character of *Killer of the North* and certainly not sufficiently common to be the real first name of anyone living here. Most islanders have signed up to shetnet broadband. Even if I were to ask a computer geek to track down the machine from which it was sent, I'd guess it would be from an Internet cafe or the library in Lerwick. I felt as shaky as when my hire car had skidded on ice. My visit was secret. That was the deal. I'd created an alias for the car hire and the flight. Highly illegal, but during the course of my researches I'd come across people who could create a forged driving licence that would satisfy the cursory glances of officials checking in passengers for internal flights. I'd gone to considerable lengths to cover my tracks, but I should have realized that secrecy would be impossible here. Shetland is a place where gossip flourishes. I reached out for the wine behind me and poured a large glass. Soon the bottle was empty.

I've never been a good sleeper, and that night it must have been the early hours of the morning before my mind stopped fizzing. In summer it would long since have been light. That summer of ten years before was golden – there were weeks of unbroken sunshine, and the low-lying meadows close to my home were yellow with flag iris and marsh marigolds. Pictures of that time clicked into my head as I finally fell asleep.

I woke to a violent banging on the door. My heart was speeding as I pulled on a sweater and climbed down the ladder. The empty bottle and the remains of my makeshift meal were still on the table. John Sinclair was standing there. He'd been a teacher before he took the post as Arts Trust director. I'd known him well in those days – he'd taught me English – and he hadn't changed much. Same round belly. His nickname at school had been *teddy bear*. Certainly he'd changed less than I had, it seemed, because he did a double-take.

'I'd never have known you,' he said, 'if I'd met you in the street.' *The street* is what we call Commercial Street in Lerwick. The main shopping centre. The place to catch up with news.

'Aye, well. It's astonishing what a good hairdresser can do.'

In those days I'd had a mousy, tangled thatch. I'd thought the wild curls made me look like a Pre-Raphaelite heroine. Now I was blonde and sophisticated. The short cut fell back into place even after a night of disturbed sleep.

'Come in,' I said.

There was nobody about, but I was taking no chances. Besides, it was still cold. There'd been another scattering of snow in the night and a frost on top of that. Everything glistening, and the air sharp and clear.

I put on the kettle. 'Sorry about the mess,' I said. He made me feel as if I was still a pupil, that he'd wandered into our home-room to see unwashed cups and rubbish everywhere. He'd have had me on bruck duty.

'It's your home.' He smiled. He'd always had a startling smile. 'For the next month, at least.'

'Who knows I'm here?' It came out sharper than I'd expected, but I couldn't take the words back.

'Nobody. Complete anonymity. That was the deal. A place to stay and write in peace. And in return a short story from the famous Jacobina Tait.' He smiled again. It's a Shetland tradition to give girls a

feminized version of a male relative's name. In most families the practice died out ages ago, but mine was old-fashioned. Jacob was my maternal grandfather. I've always been called Jackie, though, and that's the name I write under. 'I'm the only person who knows you're here,' he said. 'Honest.'

'So you wrote this?' I switched on the computer and showed him the email. 'You're Simeon?'

'No,' he said. 'Of course not.' We looked at each other in silence. Finally he continued speaking. 'I'll check in the office, see if someone might have got word that way. I'm sorry, Jackie. Really. I'll understand if you want to leave.'

I considered and for a moment there was a flutter of relief, the possibility of escape. Perhaps I could drive back to the airport and by teatime I'd be back in the city. Anonymous and safe. But then I'd still have to live with the uncertainty, the scared sleepless nights. I shook my head.

'Come and stay with us then,' he said. 'With Helen and me. So I know you'll be safe.'

But that was unthinkable. Besides other considerations, Helen and John had three children, two dogs and a Shetland pony. There was no way I could work in that sort of chaos. John left soon after. He had a meeting to attend about the grand new arts centre on the harbour. He was surprisingly ambitious in his new role. I made coffee, and a quarter of an hour later I set out in the car.

My parents left the islands after all the publicity, but they weren't suited to life in the south and now both are dead. Different illnesses, but both with the same cause: depression and irrational guilt. They were eaten away by that, just as cancer eats away at a healthy body, though how could they blame themselves for Billy's death when they weren't even there? The house where we lived was sold and I hadn't seen it since I'd left. In my head it was always bathed in sunlight, and even today, in early December, the light was clear, reflected on the snow and the ice. It lies at the head of a voe and the water runs right up to the meadow.

A couple from the south had bought the place, pleased at the price that was asked and that their sealed bid turned out to be the highest. In fact theirs was the only bid. Nobody from Shetland fancied taking it on. They knew its history. Or they believed they did; they'd read the crazy story in the papers.

I parked the car at the top of the bank and looked down at it. The house was low and newly whitewashed, and it seemed that the newcomers had decided to play at the good life because there were sheep in the in-bye fields and they'd made a vegetable garden in the sheltered land furthest from the sea.

I stood, drinking coffee from my flask and looking down at the place where my young life had been spent. Memories chased after each other.

A fifteen-year-old boy died there. His name was William Anderson, known to us all as Billy. He'd hanged himself in the barn that still stands to the side of the house, with a noose made of fishing line. I found him the next morning as I carried the empty bottles to the recycling bin we kept in there. He'd had a lot to drink. That was clear following the post-mortem carried out in Aberdeen. We'd all had a lot to drink, which is why my memories of the night are so hazy and so unreal. I know the facts that I've been told, but the pictures are unreliable. That's one reason why I accepted John's invitation to spend a month here. I hope the place will make the images sharper and give me confidence in my recollections. The story that I've agreed to write during my residency in the Bod will be the story of Billy's death.

My parents were away at a wedding in Edinburgh. It was the first time I'd been left in the house alone, and of course I planned a party. That would have been the first thought of any teenager in my situation. It would be the end of my last year at school, so a kind of celebration. A rite of passage. There was going to be a glittering party, something that we'd all remember. 'No jeans,' I told my friends. 'Glitzy clothes only. Just because we live in Shetland, we don't have to look as if we know nothing about the croft.' I was always a creator of dramatic stories. I dressed the house with fairy lights, raided the

freezer for my mother's baking, bought wine and beer. I was an only child and had been spoilt. My parents knew about the event; I wasn't planning it behind their backs. My father thought it was great fun, and secretly he would have liked to be there.

It was June. The time of the simmer dim, the long summer dusk that never really turns into night. We began our evening in the garden. My mother had been to the Co-op the day before she went south and bought bottles of cheap cava. Her contribution to the celebration. So there we were, the girls in their floaty frocks and the boys in shirts and jackets, drinking fizzy wine and feeling almost sophisticated. Did Billy Anderson turn up while we were still outside? I drank the wine too quickly and, before we moved indoors, I was already a little drunk. I don't think he did. I don't remember him on the grass. I remember the flag irises and the buttercups and the marsh marigolds in the boggy field beyond the garden wall, and the way the low sun caught the colours, but not little Billy Anderson. We weren't expecting him after all. He hadn't been invited.

A car drove down the narrow road behind me now and pulled me back to the present. I turned away from the track so the driver wouldn't see my face. He'd notice that this was a hire car and have me down as a visitor. Simeon, whoever he was, wouldn't have followed me from Scalloway, but best to take no chances.

Billy had been a friend of mine, despite the difference in our ages. He'd been a surrogate brother, almost a mascot. He'd lived in the croft just up the road from ours and we'd played together from when he'd been tiny. Me the bossy one, and Billy not caring that I bossed him about. He'd been an only child too, but his parents were very different from mine. Throughout his childhood he'd lived with their desperation. There hadn't been much money to be made in scratching a living from the poor land. My mother worked as a nurse in the Gilbert Bain hospital in Lerwick, so we always had a regular income, even when sheep prices were poor and the subsidies fell away. But the Andersons only had what they could produce and sell.

Billy's father was a drinker, one of those angry drinkers who pick fights in bars and then stagger home to shout at the family. He was stocky and strong, with a bright red face, his cheeks marked by burst blood vessels. I never knew, but I suspected he took out his frustrations on his wife, Eileen. I'd see her sometimes with a bruise to the cheek, and once she dislocated her shoulder. The police thought that Billy might have killed himself because of troubles at home, but that never made any sense to me. He'd lived with his father's rages and his mother's weakness since he was a peerie boy. Billy never talked about problems at home to me, but I felt that he shut them away at the back of his mind as soon as he walked through the rotting gate that marked the end of their land. Away from his house, he was quite a different person: a clown and a joker.

On impulse I walked away from the car now and down the track to the Anderson place. Billy would fly up there to catch the bus to school, always waiting until the last minute, until he'd seen the bus on the brow of the bank, before leaving home. He'd be out of breath when he arrived, his face nearly as red as his father's. But laughing. Away from the house, Billy was always cheerful. Which is why the suicide idea seemed so strange to me. The bizarre stories in the newspapers provided one explanation I suppose, but I had them down as fantasies.

The sun was round and orange and I had to squint against the light as I walked east towards it, so I didn't see the Anderson house until I was almost upon it. It hadn't changed at all in the ten years I'd been away. They could have been the same skinny and apathetic hens poking around in the yard. The same heap of rotting metal – a clapped-out car, a wheelbarrow with a hole in the bottom – rested, as always, against the door of a shed. Now I hesitated, suddenly scared. I'd assumed there would be new residents, that the place would be tarted up, just as my old home had been, but it seemed that Billy's parents still lived here. They'd sold their story to a Scottish tabloid and blamed me for what had happened to their son. And perhaps they were right. Perhaps I could have prevented it. I might have

been the cause of the tragedy that night. So how would they feel to see me today? The Internet threat didn't seem their style, but who knows? We're all online now. I wanted to turn and run, but stood, fixed to the mucky, pitted concrete. I'd come here to face the past. I should face these people too.

I saw a grey face through the grubby downstairs window. Eileen Anderson was even thinner and more gaunt, but I'd have known her anywhere. She still seemed haunted by a fear of the world beyond her kitchen walls. She must have seen me, though she didn't respond. She just stared out at me. Maybe she hoped I would go away. But I didn't. I approached the house and knocked at the door. It occurred to me then that there should have been dogs. Every croft has dogs to work the sheep. But there was no sound of barking.

It seemed an age before she opened the door.

'Aye.' A cross between a question and a greeting.

'Mrs Anderson.' I held out my hand.

'Are you a reporter?' The words sharp and accusing.

I shook my head. 'An old friend of Billy's.' Which was true enough.

'I had a reporter around in the summer,' she said. 'From the *Shetland Times*. Wanting to mark the ten-year anniversary of Billy's death with an article about teenage depression. I told him our Billy was never depressed.' She'd said *I*, not *we*. Did that mean she'd found the courage, finally, to kick Malcolm out?

'Is Mr Anderson not around?'

She looked me up and down. It occurred to me that she'd worked out who I was. 'He died,' she said. 'Five years ago. A neighbour farms the land now. I just keep the house and a few hens.' That explained the absence of dogs then. She waited for me to tell her what I was doing there, what I wanted from her. But what could I say? I could hardly demand an explanation for the newspaper article – or ask for her forgiveness – standing on the doorstep. In the end I just muttered goodbye and turned away. I think Eileen was relieved.

As I walked back to the car, the sun felt almost warm on my bare neck. I wasn't sure what to make of the conversation or what to do next. I needed a plan of action. I work better when I have a plan. All my novels are plotted intricately in advance.

I was so deep in thought that I didn't notice the scrap of paper stuck under the windscreen until I was sitting in the car. It was obscuring my view, so I got out into the cold again and pulled it away. There was writing on it, in block capitals: GO HOME JACKIE TAIT. IT'S NOT SAFE FOR YOU HERE.

In Scalloway I stopped outside the shop. My hands were shaking on the steering wheel. This wasn't supposed to be happening – I was supposed to be in Shetland on my own terms, not at the mercy of a stalker. I wondered if John could be playing some kind of game, but soon I dismissed that idea. Why would he? It was in his interest to keep me there, writing my story. After a couple of deep breaths I felt a little calmer and went into the store. Nobody took any notice of me there. I was a stranger, but these days Shetlanders are used to visitors, even in winter. I bought lentils and vegetables and another bottle of wine.

Back in the Bod, I sharpened the good strong knife, chopped onions, carrots and neeps and put the lentils to soak. It was time for comfort-food. When the soup was simmering on the hob I climbed into the loft, lay on the bed and tried to reconstruct the night of the party. Honestly.

I first noticed Billy when we were inside the house. We'd eaten some of the food and Jerry Eunson had brought out a bottle of whisky. There was music in the lounge. Andrew was playing the fiddle, showing off as he always did, leaping about. But he was a fine player and we all listened. Then suddenly Billy was there. I remember now that he was out of breath. He must have run from his house just as he flew up the track every morning to catch the school bus. So he hadn't been out on the grass

with us earlier in the evening. I was right about that.

His presence irritated me. He hadn't been invited. I was growing away from him and I didn't need his admiration any more. The friendship was starting to embarrass me. At school he was rather a figure of fun. I took his hand and pulled him into a corner. 'What are you doing here? This is a sixth-year party.'

'I need to talk,' he said. 'I can't go home until I tell you.' His face was red and there was snot on his face. His eyes were red and I thought he'd been crying.

I was about to ask him what had happened, when Andrew came in. I'd fancied Andrew for years. I mean, really since he'd started at the school. I'd had other relationships, but they'd been unsatisfactory for one reason or another. He put his arm around me. The gesture was casual, but the pressure on my neck and my shoulder made me feel almost faint.

'Just go away. Billy,' I said.

The tabloid paper that ran the story after Eileen and Malcolm talked to them claimed that we bullied Billy at that point. We taunted him and mocked him, and that's why he wandered into the bar and hanged himself. In the newspaper story there's the implication that there was some sort of ritual. Almost witchcraft. It was impossible for my parents to stay in the islands with that hanging over them; they'd always been regular worshippers in the kirk. I moved to England, where nobody had heard of Jackie Tait. But I can't see why we would have taunted or bullied Billy that night. I might have been drunk, but I'd have remembered that. I just told Billy to go away. I never saw him again until I found him in the barn the next morning, and by then he was dead.

After eating the soup I felt stronger. I sat at the computer and began to make my plan, to plot my story. I realized that I would have to meet Eileen again. I had a number of theories surrounding Billy's death, but I needed information that only she could provide. When I checked my emails I half-expected another message from my stalker, but there was nothing. The threats confused me. I didn't see how they could fit into the story at all.

It was almost dark when I set out and the snow had started again. I should have stayed in and put off my trip to the Anderson house until the morning, but I'm not a very flexible person. When I make a plan I stick to it. I parked at the end of the Anderson track, not worrying about blocking the gate. I thought it unlikely that Eileen would have any visitors, especially in this weather. I'd put on boots and my thickest jacket, but still I didn't feel properly prepared. There was just enough light for me to see the track, but I wasn't sure how I'd find my way back to the road without a torch.

All the rubbish in the yard had been covered by snow and the house seemed almost attractive. There was a light in the kitchen window. I knocked at the door. No reply. People don't lock up their homes in Shetland and I went in, shouting: 'Eileen! It's me, Jackie Tait.' Usually I'd have taken off my boots, but the floor was so mucky that I didn't think it would matter.

She was sitting in the kitchen. There was a bit of heat coming out from the stove, but not much, and I kept on my jacket. She was wearing layer after layer of clothing: thick woollen tights and socks and some moth-eaten slippers, an old tweed skirt and jumpers, and on top of them all a grey cardigan, long and loose. But despite all the clothing she still looked skinny, and the fine-knit cardigan could have been a shroud.

She turned her head slowly.

'Where did you get all that stuff for the newspaper article?' I asked.

'I never spoke to the reporter,' she said. 'That was Malcolm.'

'And where did he get it?'

'From you,' she said, and there was surprise in her voice, so I believed her. 'He said you'd told him what happened.'

'I never spoke to him after Billy died.' None of this was making sense. Facts and theories whirled

round my head like the snowflakes outside the window.

~~'You posted a letter through the door.'~~ She turned to face me again, just moving her head, so that she looked like a clockwork toy. 'A confession. It was your writing. We checked it against a note you left for Billy one day.'

'Did you show the letter to the police?'

This time she shook her head. The same jerky movement. Click, click. 'Malcolm never had much time for police. And what would they do? It was suicide, everyone was agreed on that.'

And besides, I thought, the newspaper would pay. Malcolm would get no money from the police.

For a minute I wondered if it were true after all. That night at the party, had we all turned on Billy? Had we teased him and pushed him, mocked his drunken father and his weird mother? The scene seemed almost familiar. I felt that if I tried hard enough I could reconstruct the events in my head. Had he run off into the calm almost-night, then come back to kill himself? To reproach us for our cruelty.

But still I couldn't see things that way. I'd drunk so much that even the next morning I remembered little about what happened and the recollections that did remain were quite different. Andrew kissing me. The two of us walking hand-in-hand along the sand as the sun slid up over the horizon again. All the other guests had disappeared by then and we were alone.

'Do you still have the letter?' I asked.

'Malcolm gave it to the newspaper,' Eileen said. 'Besides, it was spiteful, horrid. Why would we keep it?'

'I never wrote it.' But, even as I said the words, I could hear the uncertainty in my voice. Because by now I wasn't entirely sure that was true. Another picture slipped into my head. I got to my feet and left the house.

It was still snowing, but not so heavily, and occasionally the clouds parted and there was a moon. I turned the car with difficulty and slithered back to the main road. When I got to the Bod there was a note on the door. It would be from John, checking that I was OK and perhaps inviting me to his chaotic house for supper. At least I hoped that was the case. But when I pulled out the pin and took the note outside, I realized that it was from the stalker again. This time in enormous letters, screaming at me: GO AWAY SOUTH. YOU'RE NOT WANTED HERE.

That night I decided that I would go. I couldn't face a month of threats and uncertainty and, besides, perhaps I had found out all that was needed. I got online and booked myself onto the afternoon flight south the following day. I sent a couple of emails, and then brought up the synopsis of my story. It seemed that the plot lines were working out and I had an ending in mind. For the first time since arriving in Shetland I had a few hours' uninterrupted sleep.

When I woke there was still little light. In winter it takes the sun a long time to reach Scalloway in the west. I made coffee and checked my emails. There was the reply I was waiting for. And the television film had been given the green light by commissioners. My agent was ecstatic: *Where are you? We need you back in London.* As I drove south, the sun was rising as a huge orange ball to my left. I felt a sudden burst of energy. Soon I would be back in the city, anonymous and safe. There would be no more ridiculous notes to disturb me.

I arrived early and that had always been the plan. I had been organizing this moment for a long time. Certainly before I flew into Sumburgh two days before. Because, deep down, I'd always suspected what had happened to Billy Anderson. My meeting with Eileen had only confirmed it. The narrative of his death had run through my novels, over and over again, driving me a little mad. Now was the time to put an end to that particular haunting.

I left my car by the pier at Grutness and walked up the bank. The snow had frozen hard and crunched under my boots. There were no other footprints, so I knew I would be there first. Below me

saw another car pull up beside mine. It seemed I had got there just in time. At the top, right on the edge of the cliff, there was a stone hut, used by the coastguard service as a lookout. The walls were solid enough and a large window, of the sort you'd get in a bird hide, faced the sea. Gannets hovered just below the lip of the cliff. In the spring they would breed there, with puffins and fulmars and kittiwakes. The door stood ajar. It must have been opened recently, because it had scraped the snow from the entrance. John Sinclair was already inside, leaning against the far wall. He must have come from the other side, wanting to surprise me. He'd always been good at that.

This wasn't how the story should have played out. I should have been waiting for him, the sharpened kitchen knife from the Bod in my hand. I should have forced him to the edge of the cliff, the knife in his back, and I should have shoved him over. Another terrible accident on the treacherous cliffs of Shetland. Revenge for Billy's death. And for the death of my parents.

'You're early.' I kept my voice light. Perhaps, after all, it would be possible to rewrite the denouement. 'In my email I said half-past.'

'I'm a busy man now, Jackie. Important. I don't have the freedom to plan my own day.'

'Not like when you were a teacher with a couple of babies at home,' I said. 'You were prepared to drop everything to see me then. You said I was your muse, the love of your life.'

'It was a difficult time for me. Suddenly tied down with all that domestic stuff.' He stared out to sea. This had been our special place for stolen meetings. Was he remembering that summer?

'You killed Billy,' I said, 'and you made it look like suicide.'

'I did it for you!' He almost sounded as if he believed it. 'You had your whole life ahead of you. Such a talented young woman! I knew you'd be a writer one day. And Bill was so lippy and stupid, turning everything into a joke. I knew he'd come out with some suggestive comment in class, thinking it was funny. One day someone would realize he was talking about us. Why did you tell him?'

'I didn't tell him.' But I hadn't needed to. Billy had followed me around like a besotted puppy. He would have seen John and me together. That was why he'd run into the party, all tearful and upset, needing to talk.

'I came to your party,' John said. 'It was late and I hoped to find you on your own, but you were on the beach with some lad. Billy was there, sitting on the rocks, watching you. "Look at that, sir. Andre and Jackie getting it on. More suitable, don't you think? At least he's not old enough to be her father. I was jealous and angry and I lost my temper. There was a bit of fishing line caught up in the shingle, I twisted it around his neck until he died. He was only a skinny young boy. Easy enough to carry him back to the barn and make it look like he'd hanged himself.' The words spilled out and he couldn't stop them. He'd been saving them up for a long time. Was that why he'd invited me to become his own writer-in-residence? He looked at me. 'Wasn't I enough for you, Jackie? Did you need to take up with that boy?'

'Tell me about the confession,' I said. 'The letter I was supposed to have written. The letter pushed through the Andersons' door.'

He said nothing.

'It was an essay,' I said. 'The first bit of creative writing for you, as part of my standard grade exams. I remember the comment you gave me: *Maybe you've let your imagination run away with you here, Jackie. This is a bit Gothic for my taste.* It would be in my file at school.'

Still he remained silent.

'Why did you invite me back here?' I said. 'Why drag up the past?'

'I needed to know,' he said. 'Your writing grew darker and darker. Had you guessed what happened that night? One day would you come out with it, as a piece of fiction? It's been driving me crazy. The thought of seeing the story in the bestseller list.'

'Not guilt then,' I kept my voice even, but I knew in that moment that I'd kill him. 'It wasn't guilt

that kept you awake – just the fear of being caught.’

~~He walked up to me and put his hands on my shoulders. ‘We’ll leave it, shall we? Let’s put it behind us and get on with our lives.’~~

I felt the handle of the knife in the pocket of my jacket and grasped it. ‘Why the notes?’ I asked. ‘Why try to scare me away? It was you who’d brought me here.’

‘That was nothing to do with me.’ He turned suddenly and started to leave the building, an adult bored with the tedious questions of a child. I pulled the knife from my pocket and stuck the point into his back, under the ribs, where I could do most damage. He was only wearing a fleece, and he’d have felt the point of the knife on his skin. It was very sharp. I tapped his shoulder with my other hand.

‘Walk,’ I said. There was a sudden exhilaration, as the waves below sounded very loud in my ears. It came to me that I might jump after him. I imagined how it might feel, floating past the gannets, held in the bright sunlight.

‘The notes were my idea.’ This was a different voice, and it came from right behind me. A Shetlander with an accent I didn’t quite recognize. The man went on, ‘*Not* very clever, as it turned out. But I couldn’t warn you off professionally. I’m still on compassionate leave.’ I felt arms around me, the knife prised out of my hand. ‘I remember the Billy Anderson case. I never quite accepted it was suicide, though I couldn’t persuade the Fiscal. She’ll believe me now, though. She’s in her office and she heard that conversation on her phone.’ I turned and saw the tall man who’d greeted me on my first night in Scalloway, walking through the blizzard. He was waving a mobile phone in his free hand. He was still wearing the long coat. He was dark and untidy and had a sad grin. ‘I thought Sinclair might try to harm you. Never thought it would work the other way round.’

In the distance we heard sirens coming from the direction of the airport. For a moment I thought John might jump. He hesitated on the brink of the cliff, his arms held stiffly a little way from his sides. Perez – because that was the strange detective’s name – did nothing to stop him. But John Sinclair didn’t jump. He sat on the snow and put his head in his hands. He waited until a couple of uniformed officers scrambled up the bank and took him away.

Perez saw me onto the plane. He’d talked to me immediately after Billy’s death and I’d remembered the exotic name. I thought I might be in trouble because of the knife, but he only referred to it obliquely, saying that stabbing was a horrible way to die. ‘You wouldn’t want to do that even to a man like Sinclair.’ I wondered if he’d lost someone close to him, if that was the reason for being on compassionate leave.

The sun was still up when the plane took off. I saw the white, snow-covered island beneath me, and the glitter of the water, and remembered Perez’s last words. He’d taken my hand in the airport building. ‘You’re a fine writer,’ he’d said. ‘But I could do with something more cheerful now. A bit lighter, eh? Maybe it’s time to move on.’ Then he’d grinned again and walked away.

The Spinster

She twisted the carded fleece between the fingers of her left hand and fed it into the spinning wheel. Her right foot rocked on the pedal and kept the rhythm smooth and regular. The view from her window was of her neighbour's croft land towards the sea. She'd grown up in this house and usually she took the scene for granted, but now Stuart's digger was biting into the peaty soil and preparing the foundations for his new home. It wouldn't block her whole view, and he'd come to her, very polite and quiet, explaining that – with the new baby on the way – the old house wouldn't be big enough.

'Much easier to start from scratch,' he'd said. 'The planners have given their permission.'

She'd seen that, even if she objected, the house would be built, and Stuart had always been a good neighbour. She'd known him since he was a bairn and she didn't want to fall out now. So she'd smile and said of course they needed a bigger place and it would be good to see a child playing from her window. Joan was a spinster and there hadn't been a child in Holmsgarth since she and her sisters were young.

But the sight of the digger made her uneasy. It disturbed the rhythm of her spinning and when she looked at the yarn it was uneven and bobbly. It would knit in an interesting way, but it wasn't how she'd intended it to be. She set her spinning aside and went to the kitchen to make her tea, but even from there she could hear the rumbling of the machine, and she fancied that she could feel its vibration under her feet.

Later she took up her knitting. She was working on an all-over jersey, a commission from an American woman, who'd wanted natural colours and traditional patterns. By now it was dark outside and she had the curtains closed. She switched on the television to hide the sound of the digger, but the headlights were so bright that they shone through her curtains, making weird shadows on the wall. Then the lights went away and everything was quiet, and for the first time that day she could concentrate on her work.

She knitted as her mother had done with a leather belt, padded with horsehair, and three pins pointed at both ends. One of the pins she'd stick into the belt and the garment grew as a tube. There were three colours, Shetland black, grey and mourrit, a natural reddish brown, and she kept the tension even as she wove the wool into the back of the pattern. She was working on the anchor motif and that reminded her of her father, who'd had his own fishing boat and had been lost at sea. Soon she was so lost in her memories that when there was more noise on the building site she hardly noticed it.

They'd been three sisters. Half-sisters in fact, because Joan's mother had died when she was a bairn and her father had remarried. Joan was the oldest by ten years, and then there'd been Annie and Edie. Now Edie was away and Annie was dead, taken by cancer just two years before. None of them had found a man. The nearest any of them came to it was in the Seventies when the oil had first come into the islands. Then men had flocked to Shetland, like the seabirds arriving on the cliffs in the spring, jostling for space on the rocky ledges. Men were everywhere, and girls could take their pick. Joan wa

in her thirties then, already considered something of an old maid, but Annie and Edie had been young and wild and looking for husbands. It was a while since Joan had remembered that time, but now, her fingers busy with the knitting, stopping occasionally to follow the pattern she'd made by plotting tiny crosses on graph paper, she relived those months in the summer of 1974.

She'd watched from the sidelines as her sisters made fools of themselves at dances and parties. There was one particular man from the Scottish mainland. He was an engineer with the construction company and he had digs with Margaret Hay, who lived just down the road from Holmsgarth. He'd hired a car and set off to work every morning looking very smart. Both Edie and Annie had thought he would make a fine husband and often found excuses to drop in on Margaret when they knew the man was at home. Joan paused for a moment and rested her work in her lap while she struggled to remember his name. James Mackie. How could she have forgotten it, when he had caused so many arguments in their house? So much disruption to their lives.

She continued knitting. The anchor pattern was finished and she felt a moment of calm. It was superstition, but knitting the anchor always made her uncomfortable. Now she had three rows of mourrit to work. Easy and needing no concentration.

James Mackie, quiet and respectable, from somewhere on the west coast of the Scottish mainland, with an accent that was soft like cream. All three sisters, starved for so long of new male company, dreamed of James Mackie when they went to sleep at night. Even Joan, who understood that she was too old to have a chance with him, who would always be a spinster. By then their father had died, drowned in an accident, his body never found, and they were just four women living at Holmsgarth. Joan's stepmother and the three sisters.

Without realizing it, she'd finished the three rows of plain knitting and she took up the graph paper again and focused on the pattern.

There had been a dance in the community hall and they'd all gone along. It had been planned for weeks. The band was from Cullivoe; the boys were fine musicians, famous throughout the islands. In Holmsgarth, the women had baked, even Joan, who'd been working all day in the post office in Lerwick. They'd packed up the bannocks, the tray-bakes and the fancies into old biscuit tins and carried them very carefully along the road to the hall. Edie had got there early. She'd cut long sheets of white paper to make tablecloths for the trestle tables set at one end of the room, and the band was on the stage, tuning up. There'd already been an air of excitement. More than that – an air of tension. Like just before a thunderstorm.

Joan turned back to her knitting. There was more noise on the road outside. She looked at the clock on the mantel shelf. Stuart must be working late tonight, or perhaps they'd invited pals along to a party in their house. They'd not be doing so much of that once the bairn arrived. Joan felt a sudden pang of regret. All *her* pals had grandchildren now, and she had to look at the photos and pretend to be interested. She turned her mind back forty years to the dance in the hall, saw James Mackie walking in. You could tell that he'd prepared for the party too, that he'd had a shower after work, chosen an ironed shirt. His dark hair was slicked back. Some of the local boys walked with a kind of swagger, but he moved lightly. Joan could see that he'd be a splendid dancer.

She was jerked back to the present by a banging on the door. 'Come in,' she said. She didn't want to get up and disturb the knitting attached to her belt. Besides, her door was never locked. She turned in her seat and saw a man walk in. He was dark and he walked lightly, just like Mackie. Perhaps because she'd been thinking about the engineer, for a strange moment she wondered if it *was* Mackie and if she'd slipped back in time somehow and into the world of her memories. Then she recognized the newcomer as the police inspector from Ravenswick. 'Jimmy Perez, what can I do for you at this time of night?'

'I need to talk to you, Joan.' His voice was soft like cream too, but the accent was Fair Isle, not

mainland Scots.

~~‘Well, take a seat by the fire, Jimmy. And you won’t mind if I take up my knitting. It’s hand-spun wool, and the Yanks will pay a fortune for a Shetland all-over jersey.’~~

He nodded. ‘Stuart was working on the foundations of his new house,’ Perez said. ‘He found a bodied Old, but preserved in the peat. Would you know anything about that, Joan? You’d likely have been living in this house when he died, and in those days that was Holmsgarth land.’

She changed the knitting pin in the horsehair belt, and as the needles clicked she began to talk. She thought it was time the story was told, and this gentle man, who knew about grief, was the right person to hear it.

‘There was a dance,’ she said. ‘I was there with my sisters. And there was this soothmoothen, an engineer at Sullom Voe. James Mackie.’

‘Is that the name of the man Stuart found?’

She hesitated for a moment and then she nodded, thinking again that it was time for the truth to be told. ‘I had two sisters, Annie and Edie, and they fancied him, fought over him. You know young girls. And it was a wild time in the islands, Jimmy. The oil was coming ashore and we were overrun by strangers. It seemed kind of lawless. Like a gold-rush town.’ She knew that was no excuse for what had happened that night, but she wanted him to understand. He said nothing and she thought he would sit there all night, if that was as long as it took.

‘Most folk had been drinking,’ she said. ‘Not me. I’ve never liked it so much, but my sisters had been outside with some of the boys. They had bottles of whisky in the cars. You know how it goes, Jimmy. Much the same these days with young people.’

Still he said nothing. In her head she relived the scene. Mackie walking through the door, the music starting and him walking up to her and giving her a little nod. ‘Would you dance with me, Joan?’ That voice which had haunted her dreams. Caressing. And she’d set down the plate of scones she’d been holding and he swung her onto the floor and the music carried them around, until she was dizzy with the sound and the excitement at having been chosen. At the end she’d been aware of Edie and Annie watching them, thinking he’d picked their big sister for the first dance out of politeness, waiting for their turn. Only their turn never came. James Mackie had danced with the old maid all night.

‘He walked us home,’ Joan said. ‘All three of us. My sisters were in a dreadful state. Angry.’ And she’d understood their humiliation. Of course they’d danced, but with the local boys and the roustabouts from the rigs. Not with the smart man in the shirt, with the soft voice and the polished shoes. Not with the object of their dreams. And on the way home they’d behaved like spoilt little girls again. Their father had doted on his younger daughters and given them everything they wanted. Joan, the child of a previous marriage, had been expected to behave. She explained all this to Jimmy Perez who listened, nodding occasionally to show that he understood.

‘You were like Cinderella,’ he said, with a smile.

‘But they weren’t the ugly sisters!’ Joan paused in her knitting. ‘They’d always been bonny little things. Everyone loved them. Especially my father. They could do no wrong, in his eyes.’

‘You were telling me what happened when you were on your way home.’ Perez leaned forward to listen.

Joan replayed the scene in her head. The girls, stupid drunk, egging each other on, taunting the man. ‘Why did you choose *her* to dance with, when you could have had us?’

Then Mackie had stood in the middle of the track. Quiet and firm, his face lit by the moon. ‘Why would I choose a child when I could have a woman?’

And then Edie had lashed out at him in frustration, the attack shocking and unexpected. She’d always been uncontrollable when she was angry, given to fits of temper. Suddenly she had a pair of scissors in her hand, the sharp scissors she’d brought from home to cut the paper tablecloths. The ste

flashed in the light and then they were in the man's neck. Blood everywhere. They knew death, all three of them. They'd helped kill their father's beasts.

‘What happened next?’

‘We buried him.’ Joan looked up from her knitting. ‘In the land that Stuart bought from us for his grazing. It never occurred to us that he would build a house there, that the body would ever be found.’

‘You helped them?’ Perez seemed shocked by the idea. He knew her as the former postmistress, a respectable spinster. ‘You didn’t think to tell the police?’

Joan thought about that for a moment and shook her head. It had been an evening for her to remember, but she’d known she could never leave Holmsgarth to go south with James Mackie. She hadn’t lost that possibility with the man’s death. They’d sent Edie away to an aunt’s in Canada and she’d gone on to be a journalist on a woman’s magazine. Famous in her own way. Rich at least. Edie had sent Joan money for a visit, but Joan had never gone. ‘What would be the point in telling the police? Just another life ruined.’

Besides, there would have been something hypocritical in that, when Joan herself was a murderer. She’d killed their father, after all. After his marriage to the new woman from Baltasound he’d treated Joan like a kind of servant, and Joan had had a temper too. In the end she’d had enough of it – being treated like a slave in her own home, while her sisters were spoiled and feted like princesses. She’d felt as Perez said, like a kind of Cinderella.

One morning she’d risen early and drilled holes in his yowl before he set off after the fish they called piltock. She’d stood by the jetty and watched him drown. But that was a secret she’d never tell not even to the police inspector from Ravenswick with the kind smile and the voice like cream.

Stranded

Hilbre's my guilty secret, yeah? Nobody knows that I go there. How could I explain the attraction of the place to my mates or my screwed-up family? Three lumps of sandstone in the middle of the Dee Estuary, and you can only reach them at low tide by paddling across the sand and the mud, looking like some sort of twat. And once you've walked round Little Eye and over Middle Eye and you're on the main island, what is there to do? You can watch the seals hauled out on a long sandbank towards Wales, or the huge flocks of birds that swoop and dive like a swarm of locusts, and that's it. But it's peaceful, and in our house and in my life there's not much peace.

I don't always have the place to myself. Sometimes the keeper's there with his wife. They live in a low white house, and I think it must be the best job in the world. Until there's the first sunny Sunday of the spring and hoards of trippers march across the sand like an invading army, with their sarnies and their suncream and their screaming kids. I never go to the island on days like that. And sometimes the loud-mouthed sailing types turn up. They hang out in a wooden hut, called the Canoe Club, which is nearly a hundred years old. The date is painted over the door. Occasionally they take out the canoes. They're all curves, wide in the beam like modern sculptures – much too interesting for the loud men who push them into the water. But mostly the canoe-club members have the sort of parties you see in films set before the war, with cocktails and fat men smoking cigars, and sometimes they dance on the grass to music from a wind-up gramophone. I first saw Vicky at one of those parties.

My name's Anthony Murphy and I live in Birkenhead and I'm not from a background where I'm supposed to like wildlife or walking across the shore early in the morning to get to Hilbre Island before the tide comes in. It's 1978 and my mates are all punks. We hate the crap that's prog rock, and our parents. I got a scholarship to the posh school, where the teachers wear gowns and think it's good for poor boys to be humiliated. We wear blazers and learn Latin, and the lads on the estate take the piss every time they see me.

So here I am, Anthony Murphy, caught between two worlds. Bright charity-case born of a docker and a cleaner, one of five brothers and desperate for peace. A Tranmere Rovers supporter in a household of LFC fans. Perhaps that's why I like Hilbre so much, because it's caught between two worlds too. Halfway between England and Wales and stranded like a sandstone whale between the land and the sea. I'm fifteen years old and I don't feel like a lad or a man.

When I first see Vicky it's a weekend at the end of May. I leave the house early and get the first train to West Kirby. My mam thinks I go fishing with my mates. I never lied to her, but she saw the tide table in my room and jumped to that conclusion. She thinks I'm with lads from school and she loves that. 'Our Anthony's settled in ever so well there,' she tells her friends.

I arrive at the island at the same time as the Canoe Club party, but it would be too dangerous to go back now because the tide's on its way in. They're piled into two Land Rovers, which take the recognized route across the estuary, coming ashore just before Middle Hilbre and following the track

onto the main island, bouncing too fast over the rocks. They're shouting and laughing as if they're already drunk, although it's not yet nine in the morning.

I'm reading *The Great Gatsby* for my exams and I take the book to the north of the island. Sometimes you find birdwatchers there, sitting in the wooden hide that's built on stilts over the slipway, but they like stormy weather, north-westerly gales. Today it's still and sunny, with the hint of a mist over the mainland. The tide slides in like oil. I can hear the noise from the Canoe Club, even from where I'm sitting, and I'm drawn to it, half-fascinated and half-disgusted. They've set up the gramophone and some of them are dancing an old-fashioned waltz on the grass. Again I'm trapped between two worlds, between the Long Island parties of *Gatsby* and this strange gathering on the Wirral. Then a group of men start talking about Margaret Thatcher and what a wonderful woman she is, and I come back to earth and hate them.

Peering over the wall, I catch the eye of a girl of about my age. She's wearing white trousers that are tight around her bum and her legs and reach halfway between her knee and her ankle, and a red and white striped shirt. Not trendy, but she looks good. She walks through a gap in the wall to meet me.

'Come in,' she says. 'We don't bite.' From the way she speaks those words I can tell that she goes to the girls' equivalent of my school, or somewhere even posher. A classy accent and the confidence that comes with money and education.

I shake my head. The last thing I need is to be patronized by those tossers. She obviously understands what I'm thinking because she nods. 'Just wait there.'

She goes into the wooden building and comes out with a nearly full bottle of wine and two glasses. The adults are all steaming by now and nobody challenges her. We find a sheltered hollow on the west side with a view across the estuary to Wales. It's past high water, and Hilbre is a real island. Her name is Vicky Macfarlane and her dad is commodore of the West Kirby Sailing Club. She lives in a big house in Hoylake and she has a younger sister. When I reach out to touch her, her skin is warm. I expect her to push my hand away because that's what usually happens with posh girls, but she doesn't. We kiss and she tastes of white wine. There's a smell of crushed grass and of salt, and we feel as if we have the whole place to ourselves.

I must have fallen asleep, because when I wake I'm on my own and in the distance I can hear the canoe club packing up. The tide's out and members are climbing into the Land Rovers. Vicky's helping a frail elderly guy into the passenger seat and I wonder if he's her grandfather. I give her a wave and she pats the pockets of her white trousers, which seems to be a kind of sign. For a moment I can't work out what she means, then I feel in the pocket of my jeans and there's a scrap of paper. She must have written a note for me while I was still sleeping. *Next Saturday? See you here?*

I beam. The sort of beam that you'd get from a lighthouse, which would shine out across the Irish Sea between here and Dublin.

The next Saturday high water is mid-afternoon, but I get there straight after the morning tide. Vicky didn't put a time on the note and there was no phone number. I guess she wouldn't want a scally with my sort of accent calling her at home, in case her parents answered. I wonder what her house is like and if there are servants to take phone calls. They'd certainly have a cleaner – someone like our man. Anyway it might not be lucky. The weather's not as good as it was the weekend before. It's a bit damp and murky. Suddenly she's there, walking across the island towards me. She's wearing baggy trousers rolled up to her knees, so I can tell she's crossed the channel barefoot, and a jersey and an oilskin jacket. She's carrying sandals in one hand and in the other a big brass key, which she dangles from one finger. It will let us into the Canoe Club.

Inside, the hut smells of wood varnish and damp. I've never been in a boat, but that's what it makes me think of. There's a bunk room with blankets neatly folded at the end of each bed, and a common room with squashy old chairs and a long table. Vicky opens cupboard doors until she finds a bottle of

whisky. I've never drunk whisky before, either.

I ask her about herself. Not to be polite or because that's the way I think I'll get inside her knicker but because I'm really interested. Her father's a lawyer, not working in the criminal courts but advising businessmen on contracts and trusts. She goes to Calday Girls' Grammar School, which is what I'd guessed, and she's doing O levels, like me. Mostly languages. She doesn't mind Latin. Then she grins. 'But I didn't come all this way to talk about fucking Virgil.' It's the first time I've heard a girl swear. This is a day for new experiences.

We pull two mattresses onto the floor of the common room and lie there, the bottle in easy reach. We're still talking, but about stupid stuff now – favourite colours and food, favourite books – and we're touching and teasing. I pull her jersey off and see that she's wearing a blouse underneath. I start undoing the buttons. That's when she says she has to get back before the tide. 'So get a move-on with those buttons, Anthony Murphy.'

I know that we'll have to leave the island before one o'clock to get to the mainland safely and I check my watch. Eleven-thirty.

'I'd like to stay here forever,' I say. 'Just you and me.'

Then I forget what I was saying, because I undo another button and see that she's not wearing a bra.

When we go outside later a mist has rolled in and everything's blurred and strange. We can't even see the mainland. The keeper's tractor isn't in the yard, so he must be away from the island. Vicky and I are alone here. It occurs to me that we should wait until after the tide, when we know it'll be safe to cross. I feel responsible for her. But she says that her parents are expecting her back and she'll be in deep trouble if she's late, so we set out together, hand-in-hand, like a brother and sister in a kid's fairy story.

The thing about the tide in the Dee is that it's not predictable. It snakes through the gullies, filling deep channels that can cut off your progress to the mainland. People have drowned because they don't show the water the proper respect. Just a hundred yards from the island I lose all my sense of direction. I can't see land at all. The fog is dense and seems to shift like the soft sand under my feet, so I imagine that there are shadowy figures on the shore with us. No sound. Nothing solid to hold onto except Vicky's hand, and she seems quite confident that she knows the way. I tell myself that she's been crossing the estuary since she was a baby and she's a sailor, so she'll know about wind direction and the sun. But there is no wind and there's no sun. I stand still and she stops with me. My feet sink into mud. Nearer to the mainland it's all sand, so I realize that we've probably been going in the wrong direction altogether and out towards the open sea. Forty minutes have passed since we left the island and the tide will be well in behind us by now.

'Come on!' she yells and she tugs on my hand. It's as if she's high or drunk, or she doesn't care what happens to her. It comes to me that she doesn't have the sort of perfect home life that I'd imagined for her and that she really doesn't mind if she lives or dies.

That's when I hear it. A dog barking. Very distant and it's coming from behind me. I'm almost faint with relief. Now we have something to head for. 'This way!' I shout it so loud that it echoes around us.

But Vicky doesn't seem to hear. She's pulling me out towards the mouth of the river. It's as if she's flying, like one of the wading birds that swoops over the sandbanks at low tide, leaping the channels and tugging me after her. I let go of her hand. 'No. It's this way.' But she takes no notice and hurries on.

I'm a coward. I'd told her that I wanted to stay with her forever, but I don't care enough to put my own life in danger. I turn round and follow the sound of the yapping dog. Occasionally I look back, but there's no sign of her. I know that I've probably left her to drown, but she was so mad and so wild out there that perhaps it was what she wanted all along and she saw our meeting as a strange suicide pact. After ten minutes I hear more sounds, car engines and a woman's voice. The shadows in the mist

become solid. I stumble ashore at West Kirby. It's mid-afternoon in a suburban town. People are shopping, and a couple of teenage girls are walking along the pavement giggling. Everything is normal. Except me. I'm shaking with cold and the remains of the terror I felt out there in the fog. I find a phone box and dial 999 and tell the coastguard that I think there's a girl on the shore in the fog. I don't give my name or hers. I'm ashamed that I turned back without trying to save her.

In the train on the way back to the chaos of my home I think that Vicky Macfarlane will haunt me for the rest of my life.

'Good day, son?' my mother says when I walk into the house.

'Yeah,' I say and go to my room. Another sort of betrayal and more guilt, but I can't face her questions.

Time moves on. I pass my O levels, and my mam has a party for me to celebrate. I'm more settled at school now. The older you get, the easier it is to be different. The posh boys try to talk like me, which is laughable really, and I'm considered bright, possible Oxbridge material, so the teachers suck up to me too. I haven't been back to Hilbre since I got lost in the fog with Vicky. I tell myself it's because I've grown up, but really it's because I still have nightmares about that day and I don't want to be reminded that I left a girl to drown. I hope the nightmares will fade with time, but two years later when I'm coming up to my A levels they become even more intense. I realize that we're approaching the anniversary of the incident and I decide that I have to face my anxiety. Perhaps Vicky survived and I'm going through all this angst for nothing.

I look up the Macfarlanes in the phone book and there they are, living in one of the big houses in Hoylake, close to the golf course, just as Vicky described. I get the bus there after school and stand in the street, looking in. The building isn't as smart as I'd expected. It could do with a coat of paint and the garden is overgrown. I walk up the path and knock at the door, wondering what I'll do if Vicky answers. But the woman who opens it is middle-aged. She's dressed in a faded print dress that my mother wouldn't be seen dead in and she looks tired and distracted.

'Mrs Macfarlane?' I assume this is Vicky's mother.

'Miss Macfarlane,' she snaps back.

'I wonder if I could speak to Vicky.' I've learned to speak properly and my voice is polite.

She looks horrified, as if I've hit her. 'There's nobody of that name here.' Then she seems more curious than angry. 'Who told you about Vicky?'

I'm starting to think that this woman is crazy and I back away from the door. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have bothered you. I've obviously made a mistake.'

'No,' she said. 'Come in. I want to tell you the story. Nobody remembers her now but me.'

She steps aside and I follow her in. We sit in a room at the back of the house and there on the wall is a photo of two young women. I recognize one of them as the girl I made love to on Hilbre. 'That's me and Vicky,' Miss Macfarlane says, 'just before she died in 1950. She drowned, you know, and our family was never the same again. It seemed so unfair, when we survived the war.' And she goes on to tell me the story that's already familiar, of the wild and sparky girl who tried to cross the estuary from Hilbre too close to the tide as a fog was rolling in. 'Her body was never found,' she says. 'I imagine Vicky on the island, just as she was that day.'

I imagine it too. A young woman, dead for nearly thirty years. Stranded and lonely. Looking for company. Desperate for me to join her.

sample content of Offshore: a short story collection

- [Casebook: A novel book](#)
- **Rogues here**
- [click The Cloud Atlas](#)
- [download online The Supermodel and the Brillo Box: Back Stories and Peculiar Economics from the World of Contemporary Art](#)

- <http://test1.batsinbelfries.com/ebooks/Of-Human-Bondage.pdf>
- <http://yachtwebsitedemo.com/books/Blaine--Cronicas-de-un-vampiro-real.pdf>
- <http://unpluggedtv.com/lib/The-Guns-of-Sapinero.pdf>
- <http://aneventshop.com/ebooks/The-Supermodel-and-the-Brillo-Box--Back-Stories-and-Peculiar-Economics-from-the-World-of-Contemporary-Art.pdf>