



SQA Scottish set text National 5 and Higher crossover short story collection

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‘A Voice Spoke To Me At Night’ by Helen McClory

I don't know why it did. I live in a new-build above a Tesco metro. This part of town seems to be history-less; I think before they built the flats there was an auto garage and before that I don't know, maybe something brownfield. But the voice that spoke to me was from someone from years and years in the past — I guessed, because I didn't fully understand it. I read a bit of Chaucer in school, and it reminded me of that, a little bit gibberish and some I could get. The voice had a Scottish character to it, though not like any dialect I could pick out. On the first night and for two nights after it was just a voice.

I went to bed at the normal time for me, which is about ten, and took my phone into bed and scrolled through the news and some football sites I like and Twitter until I was too tired to read straight, and then listened to a podcast about a crime and then one about food, to calm me down.

I like to be cosy with all the blankets around me, especially my feet, because I have a terrible fear that something will come and drag me by the ankles if I leave them exposed. This and the mirrored sliding doors of my built-in wardrobe are two things which unsettle me when I'm trying to sleep. I never liked the empty space of the mirrors taking up so much of my room, even before this happened. Now I can't stop thinking of them, everything a mirror is, and everything it isn't. I am trying to be honest here. I'm not a brave type.

I had just put down my phone and got into the position I find comfy in bed — left-hand side, curled up, pillow against my stomach — when the voice said — something. Garbled old language coming across a distance. I held my mouth shut so I wouldn't yell, but of course I knew it could have come from anywhere, that voice, the likely culprit being my phone, which I might have left in the bed and rolled over, setting off some video. I put the light on and found my phone — it was on silent. But the voice had also stopped. I didn't think anything too much of it; I had lots of reasons to soothe myself with. If not the phone, then the downstairs or next door neighbour's TV echoing through the walls as they watched some documentary about the ancient past.

After a while of thinking, I slept, and then woke up. I went about my day fine enough; I had a meeting with my boss, but it was okay. He doesn't think much of me — he doesn't hate me either, since I do what needs doing and I don't complain. If I don't join in with workplace bonding, chatting about the telly and politics and that, then that's all he can hold against me, and it's not enough to make him want to let me go, I tell myself.

I went home at the usual time and tried to wait out the usual unpleasant feelings that I get from meetings with my boss. I just ate toast for dinner. Sometimes toast is the limit. I went to bed and decided to read, but I got distracted from my book and picked up my phone and looked at Tinder, but only because I wanted to look at some faces, not to make any decisions.

I went to sleep, and this time the voice woke me up, clearer and closer. I should say it was a man's voice, slightly gruff and raspy, like he smoked, but I'm pretty sure the time he's supposed to be from they didn't have tobacco. That was Francis Drake. Tobacco and the potato.

The voice didn't sound urgent, I thought. But you can't always read tone in a voice that you don't expect, coming out of nowhere in the middle of the night, and barely in your language. I checked

my phone, I turned all the lights in the place on. There was nothing. The voice continued for a while, so I decided with a bit of effort it was either the neighbours or maybe, maybe a spy, whose equipment had malfunctioned and now their bug in my place was throwing back the sound of him talking while reading out a very old story in old time Scots, because he was bored. I quite liked that idea, and wished him well, that spy, if he was so low down on the list of spy-employees that his job was spying on me.

Eventually I slept. When I woke up, it had decided to become Autumn overnight. I don't like Autumn because it does the usual and makes me a bit sad without specific reasons, just when I'm trying my best.

When it comes I know the year is getting old, and soon it will be over, another year, and I don't have any particular thoughts about that, except I feel vaguely anxious. As if that's not enough, the leaves that get everywhere make me think of slipping and hurting myself, and the darkness makes me worry I will slip and hurt myself on the leafy ground and go unseen, because everyone else is indoors, safe, with their curtains closed against the darkness, which has swallowed me up, and after a while, even the streetlights go out because in my imagination they are activated by motion, and then I just lie there. But I like to imagine I'd be brave while lying there, if I am not knocked out.

The rain threatened all day but never came, which is just typical of Autumn. I walked home catching up with my phone but stepping very carefully between the leaves, because there's no point being careless, if you have the energy to be careful. You have to take care of yourself. The clouds looked heavy and did nothing with their rain, while the leaves hung on the city trees by their edges. It was like they were waiting until night came properly down before letting go and making the pavement even more treacherous, but beautiful too, I suppose, in their jaggy layers. There's always something beautiful going on, which I should try to notice and remember.

This time the voice came while I was eating my dinner and watching a Let's Play of a kingdom-building game. I knew the voice wasn't from that, because I'd heard all the sounds of that game, which were mostly upbeat bleeps, and the voice of the let's player, which was Canadian and silly.

The voice, the strange old voice, spoke to me this time with a bit more neediness, I think, and it kept on going. But I didn't say anything, because what could I say? Saying something would be acknowledging it was there, and I was trying to believe it was just a fluke of sounds from harmless places, the thin walls, some devices malfunctioning, and holding on to the fact, I thought, that it wasn't me malfunctioning. Though how would I know? The voice rambled on, raspy and dry and a little bit wobbly. I could hear some emotion other than need — like he needed to know I was listening, but also that the story he was telling was something that was painful to him and important. I could have got more of what he was saying if I listened closer, but I didn't want to do that.

What could I do? I went to bed and put my headphones in. Eventually the voice, which never got any louder, started to hesitate, and then stopped.

When I woke up the next day I remembered it was a Saturday. I was nervous about staying all day in my flat, with that voice potentially coming back at any moment, but I also didn't want to change my plans for what was possibly a kind of hallucination on my part, so I stayed in and made French toast. Anyway it was raining, properly lashing it down. Like God was angry with pavements and streets and was trying to pummel them back into muddy ground again. I ate the

French toast with ketchup and looked at my phone at a few videos of *Hearthstone*, which if you don't know is a card-based computer game that's free-to-play and has a bit of a look of pinball machine to it, only with magical cards.

I had just had a shower — it was four pm — when I walked into my bedroom and saw a man in the mirrored sliding door. He was looking away. You do not know how disconcerting it is to see the back of someone's head in the mirror, right where you are standing. You can never see the back of your own head facing a mirror like that, and to see someone else's is sickening. I think I shouted, because the man in the mirror seemed to flinch, and then turned round.

My first and strongest thought was that I should run away, but I just stood and stared at the man there. He had a thin, skeletal face, but ruddy in the cheeks, like someone who had worked outside a lot and was healthy, but didn't have much food to eat. He had thin, fine hair that lay on the top of his head in sharp points. It was the kind of grey hair people are born with, I don't know a name for the colour, but it's common enough. I remember his fingers going up to his head to straighten the hair in place as he looked at me. He had deeply set eyes pale back there in his skull. He moved like no one else I've ever seen. It must have been his lack of body fat. He sort of slink-stepped closer to the glass and put his hand up to that. There was sky, grey clouds behind him like he was standing on the top of a hill. I started to shudder as I was breathing, quick and shallow breaths, and my whole body trembling.

'Nolit timere,' he said. He said it a few times over the course of the night, and later I looked it up. It means do not be afraid, in Latin. But I nearly started wailing. Maybe I did, I don't remember. Maybe I barked like a dog. I had known before he spoke that he was the owner of the voice I had been hearing, but it didn't make it any less terrifying and upsetting to have that proved true. I was either mad, or I wasn't mad, and both options were fucking awful. I backed out of the room and slammed the door behind me.

I went to the kitchen and downed a glass of very acidic orange juice and splashed water on my face. I went to the toilet and had a long piss and washed up and brushed my teeth. I went back to the room, because it was my room, and I hoped he would have gone, but of course he was still there, staring out at me from his thin face that had the cheek to look concerned. Eventually, since nothing was going to stop any of this from happening to me, I got together myself and put on some kind of unified front.

'Who are you?' I asked, 'what's your name?'

I pointed to my chest, and said my name. 'And you?'

'Name? Nomen?' he said. I nodded.

He said his name, but it was an old one, and I didn't know it, and I couldn't repeat it if I tried. Mal-something. Not Malcolm, but close. I might know it again if someone said it out loud, but I don't think that's likely to happen. I'm giving this as kind of evidence that I didn't hallucinate him, because if I had, I probably would have made up a name I could remember. Even my subconscious would have. I'm not that creative, and I know a lot of names, generally, from all kinds of eras of history, and I've read a lot of fantasy books. But I didn't know his, so I didn't really catch it and I don't remember it now.

'What are you doing in my mirror?' I asked. He looked around and held out his hands. I noticed the fingers were long, and I thought that was surprising because if he was from some time way

back in the dark ages he probably would be considered very tall. He was even a little taller than I am, and I'm average for nowadays, with all the food and vitamins and modern medicines we have. 'Okay,' I tried, 'what are you doing here? Why do you keep coming here? Do you know where you are? You're in my house. In my bedroom.' I didn't want to say, that's pretty rude of you, but my tone probably implied it. I put my hands on my hips, but took them off right away. Just because he was in my house didn't mean I had to be a knob. And technically he wasn't in my bedroom; he was in the mirror, or the place that could be seen through my mirror, with heavy clouds moving quickly, like the ridge of a hill. He took a small shuddery breath in, just like one of my breaths from earlier, and began his story. It was in a mixture of Scots and some Latin, and I made him stop a bit so I could press record on my phone. Later, I played it back and worked out what he had said, which took a long time.

He told me he was the only man left alive in his village. He tried to describe where his village was, but I didn't recognise it from the names of the hills he mentioned. He did say it was half a day's walk from the sea, though that doesn't cut much out in this country. You're never more than about forty miles from the sea, in Scotland. A plague had come and made everyone ill but him, over a period of a few weeks. And then everyone started dying. He talked a lot about bodies, how they had stacked up everywhere in the huts and he couldn't keep up with burying, but he had tried his best. He mentioned God a lot. That was a word I recognised when he spoke, Deus. I nodded when I heard it; he said it with a lot of pain.

He said he went into every house and that death was inside each one, standing over the bodies with her long soft wings. Yes, just like that he said it, and I shivered when I worked out the translation. He talked about the grain rotting in the field; he had been trying to get it all in for the winter. He said his hands bled from effort, and he hoped that I would believe him that they bled from effort, and not think he had just given himself an easy life. He mentioned a flour mill, and said he had gone there with the grain piled up on the laird's horse — I don't know who the laird was — but there was no one attending the mill, and he had tried to grind the grain but didn't do a good job of it. So he went home. And he ran out of hope, he said, and had no one left to bury but everyone left to cry for, and nothing much else to do with his days except feel his heart's pains and put what food away for the winter that he could.

He had decided to live in the laird's house because it was off from the village and had had the least visits from death, even though, he said, it was a sin to take the laird's place. He sighed and shuddered a lot here, so clearly it worried him, what he'd done — he wanted to reassure me he didn't have any ideas about his station in life suddenly being raised above what was natural.

He said he had learned to read from a brief stay with some monks as a boy. Here I was a bit confused, something to do with almost becoming a young monk but his father needed him and pulled him out, and it had caused some bother, but he was his father's only child, or had become his only child, so they let him go. It had broken his heart, because he had loved learning, and the monastery life was not supposed to be something you just left. He felt it was his sins that had lead him out of the path to knowledge, he said, though he was just a boy then and his sins were only small ones. His father had had to pay something for taking him out, sheaves of oats, I think, for some years. He had wondered if leaving the monastery was the reason why the angel of death hadn't come for him, if it was a kind of curse, and he wanted to find out.

In the laird's house there was a library of books, and he spent some time reading, which he had never before been able to do. He built a fire up very high but made sure to replace the wood every day, in case someone came and threw him out. But no one came. He stayed up late in the

evenings and read lots of the laird's Latin books, and there was a Greek one that interested him but gave him some trouble until he found an alphabet for it in the children's room upstairs. The children were dead too, he said. Everyone was dead.

So in the empty house he taught himself Greek and how to read better. He wanted me to know he used his time well and wasn't idle. He found nothing that said it was a sin to be taken out of a monastery so he thought perhaps when the plague would pass and people returned he might make another attempt to enter the monastery with his new learning and make his life a kind of careful atonement for his sins, his other sins in life, though he couldn't think exactly what they were, perhaps sins of the mind. He was someone who thought a lot, it seemed. But then, he'd had lots of time to think about things.

I don't think I would have known what to do in that situation, if everybody around me died. Possibly I wouldn't know until I needed to go to the shops for something. I'd be fine until the food in the shops spoiled, and the electricity went out, then I'd be in some trouble. But this man kept himself going, he said, for a whole turn of the seasons, a year. All alone, with nobody coming. Could I have gone on too, like he had? Realistically I would have just died of starvation quite quickly because I can't support myself in any practical way.

When I was writing out what he'd said, after the mirror had gone back to normal, I wished I could have asked him questions in real time.

I wanted to know if he had a wife, and I wasn't clear on how a peasant like him with no more than a few months' education could teach himself a whole other language. I wanted to tell him I was impressed by that. I wanted to tell him too that I was sorry he was so alone in his world.

Loneliness is a terrible thing, wherever you are. I think it's a stronger force than love, because it's a kind of love for everyone that is never returned. In that way, maybe it's not so terrible but a kind of burning power that might give you something back, if you have it in you, beaming out. I'm not the kind of person to run away with conspiracy theories, but I can't help but feel like the reason he could see me, across the years like that, and really improbably, was because of the force of his loneliness, making a portal or something.

I don't know why he should connect with me out of anyone in existence ever. I'm not very interesting, or powerful, in my day-to-day life or in my imagination. I'd be the last to get picked for a special mission to save the earth and the first to die in a magical world, a random casualty trampled by a beast or army, I know that much. But I keep going, and now I keep going knowing that he came to me. Maybe everyone has a visit from a lonely person from the past through their mirrors; I wouldn't be surprised. I'd like the world a bit better if that was the case. After he had finished speaking, I went up to the mirror and tried to push through it, but that didn't work. He also tried, but gave up and shook his head. Then I remembered it was a good thing I couldn't go in, because I'd read that the microbes I have on my skin have evolved a lot since the microbes on his skin were in existence, meaning that I might be a source of disease myself, if I came into contact with him, and probably the other way round too. But who knows how it works; maybe the mirror would have cleansed me or covered me with a protective layer like a spacesuit. But I couldn't get through and he couldn't get through. I sat down, and he did too. The wind on his side ruffled his fine hair and he pulled his woollen clothing close around him. I knew he couldn't sit there forever. I thought I could.

I had such a funny feeling in my heart, even then, when I hadn't known everything he'd said. I nursed that feeling, and I looked at him for a long time saying nothing. He looked back at me. I

wondered what he was looking into. Mirrors weren't very common in the dark ages, or whenever there were peasants around. I guessed maybe it was the glass window of the laird's house. I went and got a piece of printer paper and scribbled out my idea of his set up. A big house with him sitting on the grass outside it. He shook his head, and made some shapes in the air, jagged. I think he meant the glass was in a big piece lying against something, a tree maybe.

I wondered how he got the idea to look in the glass. I wondered a lot of things, just sitting there, looking at him, with my bed behind me. I wanted to invite him through into my house and put him up. He could have the bed. I'd have done anything for him. That face of his, it was a good face, honest and thin. Lots of cares written on it.

I stared for so long, sometimes smiling and raising my hand, like an idiot really, but I didn't know what else to do.

Eventually it started getting dark on his side. I turned and saw from my window it was getting dark too. The light faded, and he faded, and I couldn't see him anymore. I cried out, just something pointless like 'hey! I can't see you anymore!' And he said something back, calmer than me. I didn't get a chance to record it. I don't usually get gut feelings about much, but I felt certain I wouldn't see him again, or at least not for a long time. His face comes back to me, in waves, I see it, kind, and wanting, getting. I wonder what he thought about my face, if he liked it. It must have looked strange to him, soft and unfamiliar, but I hope he thinks for all that, that it was a good face too, that my company was good for him, after so much time alone.

‘Things My Wife and I Found Hidden in Our House’ by Kirsty Logan

1. A RING

And isn't that sweet? Isn't it just too perfectly sweet, like it's a message of hope left for me and Alice, a blessing for our life together?

I caught the ring with the edge of the broom as I was sweeping out the kitchen. It scraped along the tiles and made a hell of a racket. At first I thought it was just rubbish, all clarty with grot and bugs, but when I rinsed it under the tap it came up lovely. A little circlet of glass, green as a summer sea, bright on its surface but with shadows at its centre. I thought maybe Alice's granny had left it for us on purpose. Maybe she wasn't so bad after all.

This was her house, before, and it's not that she didn't know that we were together, but it was complicated. She called me Alice's friend, and I could hear the way she put inverted commas around it, even after Al and I had lived together for years and we'd both visited her a thousand times in this musty old house that always smelled like the sea even though it was miles from water.

I slid the ring onto my wedding finger then raced through the house, calling for Alice, and found her in the spare bedroom with her arms full of floral duvets.

'These are going straight to the tip,' she said. 'Can you smell that? They're damp. Damn, I hope it's not in the walls.'

'Look, Al!' I held out my hand, queen-like. 'Isn't this pretty? Your gran must have left it.'

She peered at it. 'Is it plastic? It looks like it came out of a vending machine. Throw it away, there's enough junk in this house already.'

'It's sea-glass. I found it in the kitchen. Do you think it's a good-luck charm from your gran? To wish us well?'

Alice threw the musty duvets into the hall. 'Trust me, Rain. My gran didn't wish anybody well.'

2. PAPER

The folded page fell when we bashed the frame of the front door trying to carry the old bath out. I know, I know, we should have hired someone, but to be honest what little money we had was tied up in the house. Turns out, just because you inherit something, doesn't mean you get it for free. Alice tucked the paper in her pocket and then, when I was driving to the tip, the bath awkwardly wedged between the boot and the back seat, she pulled the paper out and unfolded it. It was as yellow as old bones and smelled musty-sweet.

'What does it say?'

Alice didn't reply.

I stopped the car at a red light.

'Hello! Are you listening?'

'It says ...' she said. 'No, it's nothing.' And she balled up the paper and put it in the glove compartment.

'Al, stop being weird! What does it say?'

'KELPIES TO HELL,' she said.

I wasn't sure whether to laugh. 'What's a kelpie?' Alice didn't reply, so added: 'Call me a Sassenach if you like, just tell me.'

'A kelpie is a mythical creature,' Alice said, frowning. 'Lives in lochs. It's a horse and also a beautiful woman. If it doesn't like you, it drags you into the water and drowns you.'

'O...kay,' I said. 'But why would your gran want to tell us that?'

'Jesus, Rain, would you drop it with the secret messages? My gran was losing it towards the end. She didn't know I was going to get the house. She didn't know I was going to live here with you. None of this means anything, okay?'

So I drove the rest of the way to the tip in silence, and together we lifted the bath where Alice's granny had had a stroke and drowned, and we threw it away.

3. A HORSE

Alice found this one. It was the size of a thumb, wedged into the skirting board under the bed. She brought it to the kitchen as I was making tea and said: 'Rain, I can't find my glasses. Can you read this?'

I rubbed the tiny horse's haunches, feeling the symbols etched into the copper.

'It's not words,' I said. 'It's runes or something. Maybe it's an old Highlands superstition, and your gran left it to protect us from being trampled by — well, not a horse, but — life? Sadness? Money worries?'

Alice raised her eyebrows. 'Well, my mum always did say my gran was a witch. She stole my grandad from another woman — did I ever tell you that?' Alice took the horse from my hand. 'He was married to someone else when they met. A woman always dressed in green, who wore strange jewellery, rings made of glass she found washed up on the beach. She had green eyes and long black hair — black as a winter night, black like it was always wet.'

My eyes were wide. 'What happened?'

'My gran went round to talk to her, to say, basically, I want your man and there's nothing you can do about it, and she must have been pretty convincing because the next day the woman was gone. She left the village — went for a job down south or something. But you know the strange thing? No one ever saw that woman again.'

'Oh my God!' I said. 'Did your gran — do you think she — could she have done something?'

Alice laughed. 'Come on, Rain! What, you think my wee old granny was a murderer?'

'Why not? Every murderer has a family.'

'It's just a silly story,' Alice said. 'Gran obviously didn't kill anyone. She was the other woman, so she had to make up stories about my grandad's ex. Make her into a spooky witch, a baddie, not a poor lass who'd had her man stolen. If the first wife was the villain, then Gran was the hero, and she could feel better. Simple as that. And she —' At this Alice jerked her hand and dropped the horse. It thudded to the floor and skittered away.

All I could do was stare at the blistered outline of the copper horse burned into Alice's palm.

4. PEARLS

It was boring, dirty work, doing up the house. Alice's gran hadn't touched anything in years — aside from hiding weird things in grubby corners, apparently. There was so much to do that Alice and I always ended up working late into the night, holding off the dark as best we could. Alice's blistered hand was healing, but slowly, and I'd got a nasty scrape up my calf from a cluster of nails left inexplicably spiked through a cupboard door.

When I found the long string of pearls on top of the wardrobe, I stripped off all my clothes and stepped into the shower — then stepped back out and wrapped the pearls around my neck. They were as long as a bridle; I looped them three times and they still covered my breasts. I stood under the hot water until I couldn't see for steam, then I walked, still dripping, into the kitchen where Alice was fixing the radiator.

'What do you think I should do with —' she said, and then she saw me and dropped the spanner. We made love on a clean dust sheet on the kitchen counter, and afterwards, Alice whispered in my ear: 'That's how you catch a kelpie, you know. With a string of pearls around its neck. My grandad told me — he caught a kelpie once. You catch it, and then it has to love you forever.' She rolled on top of me and kissed me hard, so hard the pearls pressed red circles into my sweat-damp skin, so hard my teeth nicked bloody on the inside of my mouth.

5. HAIR

We'd plumbed in the new bath, and I christened it that night with candles and bath oil. I never felt clean in this house; we'd scrubbed every inch but still kept catching this smell, rancid and salt-heavy like old seaweed. Although I hadn't said anything to Alice, I was worried that there was damp in the walls, the house rotten to the core.

I filled the bath full of the hottest water I could stand and slid right down, my nose the only dry part. I felt my muscles relax into liquid and heard my heart boom, boom, boom, steady as footsteps, steady as hoofbeats — And then there was nothing holding me up, and I was underwater, water in my nose, water in my mouth, and I couldn't breathe, and I couldn't find the sides to pull myself out and I felt water in my throat, water in my lungs, and I sank down into the darkness.

Then Alice was pulling me out and I was crouching on the bathroom floor, coughing up water, breath rasping, and there was something wrong with my hand, something tight and tickling, and I reached for Alice, and my fist was wrapped all around with layers of hair. Long black hair, black as a winter night, and as long as a horse's mane.

6. A GLASS JAR

At first, I couldn't tell what was inside. When I pulled it out of the dim hidden place inside the bathroom wall, I thought it was jam. Beneath its jacket of dust, it looked plum-dark and sticky. My tongue tingled; I thought about toast and tea and the sweet smear of berries, sitting in the sun with Alice, the sound of her laugh. But that was silly: it was too late for sun, and Alice hadn't laughed for a long time.

I shook the jar and felt the thing inside smack off the glass, the wet press of meat. I gave the jar to Alice. She went to unscrew the lid, then thought better.

She looked at it for a long time. 'It's a liver,' she said.

'A what?' I asked, because I'd heard but I wished I hadn't. In Alice's shaking grip, the purplish thing in the jar quivered.

'It's what the kelpie leaves,' Alice said, and her voice didn't sound right. 'It drags you to the bottom of the loch and eats you, every single bit of you except your liver. If you find a liver on the shore, that's how you know the kelpie has eaten someone.'

7. A KNIFE

I wasn't surprised when Alice and I found the long thin silver knife wrapped in blackened grot beneath the floorboards. It wasn't easy: to find it we'd had to pull up just about every rotting, stinking board in the house, our hands slick with blood and filth. Alice had told me that a silver knife through the heart is the only way to kill a kelpie, so if Alice's gran really had killed it, the knife was likely to be there somewhere. Her mistake, her haunting, was in keeping the thing. As proof? A memento? We'd never know. Then again, we knew that her bathtub drowning was due to a stroke. So I guess you can never really know anything.

Alice and I gathered up the ring and the paper and the horse and the pearls and the hair and the glass jar and the knife, and we put them all in a box. We drove for hours until we got to the coast, to the town where Alice's gran and her grandad and the first wife had all lived, and we climbed to the highest cliff and we threw all the things into the sea.

Together we drove back to the house, holding hands between the front seats. A steady calm grew in our hearts; we knew that it was over, that we had cleansed the house and ourselves, that we had proven women's love was stronger than women's hate.

8. MORE

Approaching the front door, key outstretched, hands still held, hearts grown sweet, Alice and I stopped. Our hands unlinked. The doorknob was wrapped all around with layers of long black hair.

‘Andrina’ by George Mackay Brown

Andrina comes to see me every afternoon in winter, just before it gets dark. She lights my lamp, sets the peat fire in a blaze, sees that there is enough water in my bucket that stands on the wall niche. If I have a cold (which isn’t often, I’m a tough old seaman) she fusses a little, puts an extra peat or two on the fire, fills a stone hot-water bottle, puts an old thick jersey about my shoulders.

That good Andrina — as soon as she has gone, after her occasional ministrations to keep pleurisy or pneumonia away — I throw the jersey from my shoulders and mix myself a toddy, whisky and hot water and sugar. The hot water bottle in the bed will be cold long before I climb into it, round about midnight: having read my few chapters of Conrad.

Towards the end of February last year I did get a very bad cold, the worst for years. I woke up, shuddering, one morning, and crawled between fire and cupboard, gasping like a fish out of water, to get a breakfast ready. (Not that I had an appetite.) There was a stone lodged somewhere in my right lung, that blocked my breath.

I forced down a few tasteless mouthfuls, and drank hot ugly tea. There was nothing to do after that but get back to bed with my book. Reading was no pleasure either — my head was a block of pulsing wood.

‘Well,’ I thought, ‘Andrina’ll be here in five or six hours’ time. She won’t be able to do much for me. This cold, or flu, or whatever it is, will run its course. Still, it’ll cheer me to see the girl.’

* * * * *

Andrina did not come that afternoon. I expected her with the first cluster of shadows: the slow lift of the latch, the low greeting, the ‘tut-tut’ of sweet disapproval at some of the things she saw as soon as the lamp was burning ... I was, though, in that strange fatalistic mood that sometimes accompanies a fever, when a man doesn’t really care what happens. If the house was to go on fire, he might think, ‘What’s this, flames?’ and try to save himself: but it wouldn’t horrify or thrill him.

I accepted that afternoon, when the window was blackness at last with a first salting of stars, that for some reason or another Andrina couldn’t come. I fell asleep again.

I woke up. A gray light at the window. My throat was dry — there was a fire in my face — my head was more throbbingly wooden than ever. I got up, my feet flashing with cold pain on the stone floor, drank a cup of water, and climbed back into bed. My teeth actually clacked and chattered in my head for five minutes or more — a thing I had only read about before.

I slept again, and woke up just as the winter sun was making brief stained glass of sea and sky. It was, again, Andrina’s time. Today there were things she could do for me: get aspirin from the shop, surround my grayness with three or four very hot bottles, mix the strongest toddy in the world. A few words from her would be like a bell-buoy to a sailor lost in a hopeless fog. She did not come.

She did not come again on the third afternoon.

I woke, tremblingly, like a ghost in a hollow stone. It was black night. Wind soughed in the chimney. There was, from time to time, spatters of rain against the window. It was the longest night of my life. I experienced, over again, some of the dull and sordid events of my life; one certain episode was repeated again and again like an ancient gramophone record being put on time after time, and a rusty needle scuttling over worn wax. The shameful images broke and melted at last into sleep. Love had been killed but many ghosts had been awakened.

When I woke up I heard, for the first time in four days, the sound of a voice. It was Stanley the postman speaking to the dog of Bighouse. 'There now, isn't that loud big words to say so early? It's just a letter for Minnie, a drapery catalogue. There's a good boy, go and tell Minnie I have a love letter for her ... Is that you, Minnie? I thought old Ben here was going to tear me in pieces then. Yes, Minnie, a fine morning, it is that ...'

I have never liked that postman — a servile lickspittle to anyone he thinks is of consequence in the island — but that morning he came past my window like a messenger of light. He opened the door without knocking (I am person of small consequence). He said, 'Letter from a long distance, skipper.' He put the letter on the chair nearest the door. I was shaping my mouth to say, 'I'm not very well. I wonder ...' If words did come out of my mouth, they must have been whispers, a ghost appeal. He looked at the dead fire and the closed window. He said, 'Phew! It's fuggy in here, skipper. You want to get some fresh air ...' Then he went, closing the door behind him. (He would not, as I had briefly hoped, be taking word to Andrina, or the doctor down in the village.)

I imagined, until I drowsed again, Captain Scott writing his few last words in the Antarctic tent.

In a day or two, of course, I was as right as rain; a tough old salt like me isn't killed off that easily.

But there was a sense of desolation on me. It was as if I had been betrayed — deliberately kicked when I was down. I came almost to the verge of self-pity. Why had my friend left me in my bad time?

Then good sense asserted itself. 'Torvald, you old fraud,' I said to myself. 'What claim have you got, anyway, on a winsome twenty-year-old? None at all. Look at it this way, man — you've had a whole winter of her kindness and consideration. She brought a lamp into your dark time: ever since the Harvest Home when (like a fool) you had too much whisky and she supported you home and rolled you unconscious into bed ... Well, for some reason or another Andrina hasn't been able to come these last few days. I'll find out, today, the reason.'

It was high time for me to get to the village. There was not a crust or scraping of butter or jam in the cupboard. The shop was also the Post Office — I had to draw two weeks' pension. I promised myself a pint or two in the pub, to wash the last of that sickness out of me.

It struck me, as I trudged those two miles, that I knew nothing about Andrina at all. I had never asked, and she had said nothing. What was her father? Had she sisters and brothers? Even the district of the island where she lived had never cropped up in our talks. It was sufficient that she came every evening, soon after sunset, and performed her quiet ministrations, and lingered awhile; and left a peace behind — a sense that everything in the house was pure, as if it had stood with open doors and windows at the heart of a clean summer wind.

Yet the girl had never done, all last winter, asking me questions about myself — all the good and bad and exciting things that had happened to me. Of course I told her this and that. Old men love to make their past vivid and significant, to stand in relation to a few trivial events in as fair and bold a light as possible. To add spice to those bits of autobiography, I let on to have been a reckless wild daring lad — a known and somewhat feared figure in many a port from Hong Kong to Durban to San Francisco. I presented to her a character somewhere between Captain Cook and Captain Hook.

And the girl loved those pieces of mingled fiction and fact; turning the wick of my lamp down a little to make everything more mysterious, stirring the peats into new flowers of flame ...

One story I did not tell her completely. It is the episode in my life that hurts me whenever I think of it (which is rarely, for that time is locked up and the key dropped deep in the Atlantic: but it haunted me — as I hinted — during my recent illness).

On her last evening at my fireside I did, I know, let drop a hint or two to Andrina — a few half-ashamed half-boastful fragments. Suddenly, before I had finished — as if she could foresee and suffer the end — she had put a white look and a cold kiss on my cheek, and gone out at the door; as it turned out, for the last time.

Hurt or no, I will mention it here and now. You who looks and listen are not Andrina — to you it will seem a tale of crude country manners: a mingling of innocence and heartlessness.

In the island, fifty years ago, a young man and a young woman came together. They had known each other all their lives up to then, of course — they had sat in the school room together — but on one particular day in early summer this boy from one croft and this girl from another distant croft looked at each other with new eyes.

After the midsummer dance in the barn of the big house, they walked together across the hill through the lingering enchantment of twilight — it is never dark then — and came to the rocks and the sand and sea just as the sun was rising. For an hour and more they lingered, tranced creatures indeed, beside those bright sighings and swirlings. Far in the north-east the springs of day were beginning to surge up.

It was a tale soaked in the light of a single brief summer. The boy and the girl lived, it seemed, on each other's heartbeats. Their parents' crofts were miles apart, but they contrived to meet, as if by accident, most days; at the crossroads, in the village shop, on the side of the hill. But really these places were too earthy and open — there were too many windows — their feet drew secretly night after night to the beach with its bird-cries, its cave, its changing waters. There no one disturbed their communings — the shy touches of hand and mouth — the words that were nonsense but that became in his mouth sometimes a sweet mysterious music — 'Sigrid'.

The boy — his future, once this idyll of a summer was ended, was to go to the university in Aberdeen and there study to be a man of security and position and some leisure — an estate his crofting ancestors had never known.

No such door was to open for Sigrid — she was bound to the few family acres — the digging of peat — the making of butter and cheese. But for a short time only. Her place would be beside the young man with whom she shared her breath and heartbeats, once he had gained his teacher's certificate. They walked day after day beside shining beckoning waters.

But one evening, at the cave, towards the end of that summer, when the corn was taking a first burnish, she had something urgent to tell him — a tremulous perilous secret thing. And at once the summertime spell was broken. He shook his head. He looked away. He looked at her again as if she were some slut who had insulted him. She put out her hand to him, her mouth trembling. He thrust her away. He turned. He ran up the beach and along the sand-track to the road above; and the ripening fields gathered him soon and hid him from her.

And the girl was left alone at the mouth of the cave, with the burden of a greater more desolate mystery on her.

The young man did not go to any seat of higher learning. That same day he was at the emigration agents in Hamnavoe, asking for an urgent immediate passage to Canada or Australia or South Africa — anywhere.

Thereafter the tale became complicated and more cruel and pathetic still. The girl followed him as best she could to his transatlantic refuge a month or so later; only to discover that the bird had flown. He had signed on a ship bound for furthest ports, as an ordinary seaman: so she was told, and she was more utterly lost than ever.

That rootlessness, for the next half century, was to be his life: making salt circles about the globe, with no secure footage anywhere. To be sure, he studied his navigation manuals, he rose at last to be a ship's officer, and more. The barren years became a burden to him. There is a time, when white hairs come, to turn one's back on long and practised skills and arts, that have long since lost their savours. This the sailor did, and he set his course homeward to his island; hoping that fifty winters might have scabbed over an old wound.

And so it was, or seemed to be. A few remembered him vaguely. The name of a certain vanished woman — who must be elderly, like himself, now — he never mentioned, nor did he ever hear it uttered. Her parents' croft was a ruin, a ruckle of stones on the side of the hill. He climbed up to it one day and looked at it coldly. No sweet ghost lingered at the end of the house, waiting for a twilight summons — 'Sigrid ...'

I got my pension cashed, and a basket full of provisions, in the village shop. Tina Stewart the postmistress knew everybody and everything; all the shifting subtle web of relationship in the island. I tried devious approaches with her. What was new or strange in the island? Had anyone been taken suddenly ill? Had anybody — a young woman, for example — had to leave the island suddenly, for whatever reason? The hawk eye of Miss Stewart regarded me long and hard. No, said she, she had never known the island quieter. Nobody had come or gone. 'Only yourself, Captain Torvald, has been bedridden, I hear. You better take good care of yourself, you all alone up there. There's still a grayness in your face ...' I said I was sorry to take her time up. Somebody had mentioned a name — Andrina — to me, in a certain connection. It was a matter of no importance. Could Miss Stewart, however, tell me which farm or croft this Andrina came from?

Tina looked at me a long while, then shook her head. There was nobody of that name — woman or girl or child — in the island; and there never had been, to her certain knowledge.

I paid for my messages, with trembling fingers, and left.

I felt the need of a drink. At the bar counter stood Isaac Irving the landlord. Two fishermen stood at the far end, next the fire, drinking their pints and playing dominoes.

I said, after the third whisky, 'Look, Isaac, I suppose the whole island knows that Andrina — that girl — has been coming all winter up to my place, to do a bit of cleaning and washing and cooking for me. She hasn't been for a week now and more. Do you know if there's anything the matter with her?' (What I dreaded to hear was that Andrina had suddenly fallen in love; her little rockpools of charity and kindness drowned in that huge incoming flood; and had cloistered herself against the time of her wedding.)

Isaac looked at me as if I was out of my mind. 'A young woman,' said he. 'A young woman up at your house? A home help, is she? I didn't know you had a home help. How many whiskies did you have before you came here, skipper, eh?' And he winked at the two grinning fishermen over by the fire.

I drank down my fourth whisky and prepared to go.

'Sorry, skipper,' Isaac Irving called after me. 'I think you must have imagined that girl, whatever her name is, when the fever was on you. Sometimes that happens. The only women I saw when I had the flu were hags and witches. You're lucky, skipper — a honey like Andrina!'

I was utterly bewildered. Isaac Irving knows the island and its people, if anything, even better than Tina Stewart. And he is a kindly man, not given to making fools of the lost and the delusion-ridden.

* * * * *

Going home, March airs were moving over the island. The sky, almost overnight, was taller and bluer. Daffodils trumpeted, silently, the entry of spring from ditches here and there. A young lamb danced, all four feet in the air at once.

I found, lying on the table, unopened, the letter that had been delivered three mornings ago. There was an Australian postmark. It had been posted in late October.

'I followed your young flight from Selskay half round the world, and at last stopped here in Tasmania, knowing that it was useless for me to go any farther. I have kept a silence too, because I had such regard for you that I did not want you to suffer as I had, in many ways, over the years. We are both old, maybe I am writing this in vain, for you might never have returned to Selskay; or you might be dust or salt. I think, if you are still alive and (it may be) lonely, that what I will write might gladden you, though the end of it is sadness, like so much of life. Of your child — our child — I do not say anything, because you did not wish to acknowledge her. But that child had, in her turn, a daughter, and I think I have seen such sweetness but rarely. I thank you that you, in a sense (though unwillingly), gave that light and goodness to my age. She would have been a lamp in your winter, too, for often I spoke to her about you and that long-gone summer we shared, which was, to me at least, such a wonder. I told her nothing of the end of that time, that you and some others thought to be shameful. I told her only things that came sweetly from my mouth. And she would say, often, 'I wish I knew that grandfather of mine. Gran, do you think he's lonely? I think he would be glad of somebody to make him a pot of tea and see to his fire. Some day I'm going to Scotland and I'm going to knock on his door, wherever he lives, and I'll do things for him. Did you love him very much, gran? He must be a good person, that old sailor, ever to have been loved by you. I *will* see him. I'll hear the old stories from his own mouth. Most of all, of course, the love story — for you, gran, tell me nothing about that ...' I am writing this letter, Bill, to tell you this can never now be. Our granddaughter Andrina died last week, suddenly, in the first stirrings of spring ...'

Later, over the fire, I thought of the brightness and burgeoning and dew that visitant had brought across the threshold of my latest winter, night after night; and how she had always come with the first shadows and the first star; but there, where she was dust, a new time was brightening earth and sea.

‘Death In A Nut’ as told by Duncan Williamson

Jack lived with his mother in a little cottage by the shoreside, an his mother kept some ducks an some hens. Jack cuid barely remember his father because his father had died long before he wis born. An they had a small kin o croft, Jack cut a little hay fir his mother’s goats. When dher wur no hay tae collect, he spent most of his time along the shoreside as a beach-comber collecting everything that cam in bi the tide, whatever it wad be — any auld drums, any auld cans, pieces of driftwood, something that wis flung off a boat — Jack collectit all these things an brought them in, put them biside his mother’s cottage an said, ‘Some day they might come in useful.’ But the mos thing that Jack ever collected fir his mother was firewood. An Jack wis very happy, he wis jist a young man, his early teens, and he dearly loved his mother. He used tae some days take duck eggs tae the village (his mother wis famed fir er duck eggs) an hen eggs to the village forbyes, they helped them survive, and his mother wad take in a little sewin fir the local people in the village; Jack and his mother lived quite happy. Till one particular day, it wis around about the wintertime, about the month o January, this time o the year now.

Jack used tae always get up early in the mornin an make a cup o tea, he always gev his mother a cup o tea in bed every mornin. An one particular mornin he rose early because he want’t tae catch the in-comin tide tae see what it wad bring in fir him. He brought a cup o tea into his mother in her own little bed in a little room, it wis only a two-room little cottage they had.

He says, ‘Mother, I’ve brought you a cup o tea.’

She says, ‘Son, I don’t want any tea.’

‘Mother,’ he says, ‘why? What’s wrong, are you not feelin —’

She says, ‘Son, I’m not feelin very well this morning, I’m not feelin very well. I don’t think I cuid even drink a cup o tea if ye gev it to me.’

‘Oh, Mother,’ he says, ‘try an take a wee sip,’ an he leaned over the bed, held the cup to this mother’s mooth an tried to get her ...

She took two–three sips, ‘That’s enough, laddie,’ she says, ‘I don’t feel very well.’

He says, ‘What’s wrong with you, Mother? Are you in pain or somethin?’

‘Well, so an no so, Jack, I dinnae ken what’s wrong wi me,’ she says. ‘I’m an ill woman, Jack, an ye’re a young man an I cannae go on for ever.’

‘But, Mother,’ he says, ‘you cannae dee an leave me mase! What am I gaunnae dae? I’ve nae freends, nae naebody in this worl but you, Mother! Ye cannae dee an lea me!’

‘Well,’ she says, ‘Jack, I think I’m no long fir this worl. In fact, I think he’ll be comin fir me some o these days ... soon.’

‘Wha, Mother, ye talking about “comin fir me”?’

She says, 'Jack, ye ken wha he is, Jack. Between me an you, we dinna share nae secrets — I'm an auld woman an I'm gaunna dee — Death's gaunna come fir me, Jack, I can see it in ma mind.'

'Oh, Mother, no, Mother,' he says, an he held her hand.

'But,' she says, 'never mind, laddie, ye'll manage to take care o yirsel. Yir mother hes saved a few shillins fir ye an I'm sure some day ye'll meet a nice wee wife when I'm gone, ye'll prob'ly get on in the world.'

'No, Mother,' he says, 'I cuidna get on without you.'

She says, 'Laddie, leave me an I'll try an get a wee sleep.'

Bi this time it was daylight as the sun begint tae get up an Jack walkit up along the shoreway jist in the grey-dark in the mornin, gettin clear. It must hae been about half-past eight–nine o'clock (in the wintertime it took a long while tae get clear in the mornins) when the tide was comin in. Jack walked along the shoreway an lo an behold, the first thing he seen comin a-walkin the shoreway was an auld man with a long grey beard, skinny legs and a ragged coat o'er his back an a scythe on his back. His two eyes were sunk into his heid, sunk back intae his skull, an he wis the most uglies'-luikin creature that Jack ever seen in his life. But he had on his back a *brand new scythe* an hit was shinin in the light fae the mornin.

Noo, his mother hed always tellt Jack what like Deith luikit an Jack says tae his ainsel, 'That's Deith come fir my auld mother! He's come tae take on'y thing that I love awa fae me, but,' he said, 'he's no gettin awa wi it! He's no gettin awa wi hit!' So Jack steps oot aff the shoreside, an up he comes an meets this Auld Man — bare feet, lang ragged coat, lang ragged beard, high cheek bones an his eyes sunk back in his heid, two front teeth sticking out like that — and a shinin scythe on his back, the morning sun wis glitterin on the blade — ready to cut the people's throats an take them away to the Land o Death.

Jack steps up, says, 'Good morning, Auld Man.'

'Oh,' he said, 'good morning, young man! Tell me, is it far tae the next cottage?'

Jack said, 'Ma mother lives i the next cottage just along the shoreway a little bit.'

'Oh,' he says, 'that's her I want to visit.'

'Not this morning,' says Jack, 'ye're not gaunna visit her! I know who you are — you're Death — an you've come tae take my aul mother, kill her an tak her awa an lea me masel.'

'Well,' Death says, 'it's natural. Yir mother, ye know, she's an auld wumman an she's reacht a certain age, I'll no be doin her any harm, I'll be jist doin her a guid turn — she's sufferin in pain.'

'You're no takin my aul mither!' says Jack. And he ran forward, he snappit the scythe aff the Aul Man's back and he walkit tae a big stane, he smashed the scythe against a stane.

An the Auld Man got angrier an angrier an angrier an ugly-luikin, 'My young man,' he says, 'you've done that — but that's not the end!'

'Well,' Jack says, 'it's the end fir you!' An Jack dived o top o him, Jack got a haud o him an Jack pickit a bit stick up the shoreside, he beat him an he weltit him an he weltit him an he beat him an he weltit him. He fought wi Death and Death wis as strong as what Jack was, but finally Jack conquered him! An Jack beat im with a bit stick, and lo an behold the funny thing happened: the more Jack beat him the wee-er he got, an Jack beat him an Jack beat him an Jack beat him — no blood cam fae him or nothing — Jack beat him wi the stick till he got barely the size o that! An Jack catcht im in his hand, 'Now,' he said, 'I got ye! Ye'll no get my aul mither!'

Noo Jack thought in his ainsel, 'What in the worl am I gaunna do wi him? A hev him here, I canna let him go, A beat him, I broke his scythe an I conquered him. But what in the world am I gaunna do wi him? I canna hide him bilow a stane because he'll creep oot an he'll come back tae his normal size again.' An Jack walkit along the shore and he luikit — comin in by the tide was a big hazelnut, that size! But the funny thing about this hazelnut, a squirrel had dug a hole in the nut cause squirrels always dig holes in the nuts — they have sharp teeth — an he eats the kernel oot inside an leas the empty case. An Jack pickit up the hazelnut, he luikit, says, 'The very thing!' An Jack crushed Death in through the wee hole — inta the nut! An squeezed him in heid first, an his wee feet, put him in there, shoved him in. An he walkit about, he got a wee plug o stick and he plugged the hole fae the outside. 'Now,' he says, 'Death, you'll never get ma mither.' An he catcht him in his hand, he threw im oot into the tide! An the heavy waves wis 'whoosh-an-whoosh-an-whoosh-an, whoosh-an-whoosh-in' in an back an forward. An Jack watched the wee nut, hit went a-sailin, floatin an back an forward away wi the tide. 'That's hit!' says Jack, 'that's the end o Death. He'll never bother my mother again, or naebody else forbyes my mither.'

Jack got two–three sticks under his arm an he walkit back. When he landed back he seen the reek wis comin fae the chimney, he says, 'My mother must be up, she must be feelin a wee bit better.' Lo an behold he walks in the hoose, there wis his auld mother up, her sleeves rolled up, her face full o flooer, her apron on an she's busy makin scones.

He said, 'How ye feelin, Mother?'

She says, 'Jack, I'm feelin great, I never felt better in ma life! Laddie, I dinna ken what happened to me, but I wis lyin there fir a minute in pain an torture, and all in a minute I felt like someone hed come an rumbled all the pains an tuik everything oot o my body, an made me ... I feel like a lassie again, Jack! I made some scones fir yir breakfast.'

Jack never mentioned to his mother about Deith, never said a word. His mother fasselt roon the table, she's pit up her hair ... Jack never seen his mother in better health in her life! Jack sit doon bi the fire, his mother made some scones. He had a wee bit scone, he says, 'Mother, is that all you've got tae eat?'

'Well,' she says, 'Jack, the're no much, jist a wee puckle flooer an I thocht I'd mak ye a wee scone fir yir breakfast. Go on oot tae the hen house an get a couple eggs, I'll mak ye a couple eggs along wi yir scone an that'll fill ye up, laddie.'

Jack walks oot to the hen hoose as usual, wee shed beside his mother's hoose. Oh, every nest is full o eggs, hens' eggs, duck eggs, the nests is all full. Jack picks up four o the big beautiful broon eggs oot o the nest, gaes back in an 'Here, Mother, the're fowr,' he said, 'two tae you, two to me.'

De aul wumman says, 'I'll no be a minute, Jack.' It was a open fire they had. The wumman pulled the sway oot, put the fryin pan on, pit a wee bit fat i the pan. She waitit an she waitit an she watcht, but the wee bit fat wadna melt. She poked the fire with the poker but the wee bit fat wadna melt. 'Jack,' she says, 'fire's no kindlin very guid, laddie, it'll no even melt that wee bit fat.'

'Well, pit some mair sticks on, Mother,' he said, 'pit some mair wee bits o sticks on.' Jack pit the best o sticks on, but na! The wee bit o fat sut in the middle o the pan, but it wouldna melt, he says, 'Mother, never mind, pit the egg in an gie it a rummle roon, it'll dae me the way it is. Jis pit it in the pan.'

Aul mother tried — 'crack' — na. She hut the egg again — na. An s'pose she cuid hae take a fifty-pun hammer an hut the egg, *that egg would not break!* She says, 'Jack, I cannae break these eggs.'

'An, Mother,' he said, 'I thought ye said ye were feelin weel an feelin guid, an you cannae break an egg! Gie me the egg, I'll break hit!' Jack tuik the egg, went in his big hand, ye ken, Jack big young laddie, catcht the egg one hand — 'clank' on the side o the pan — na! Ye're as well tae hit a stane on the side o the pan, *the egg would not break* in no way in this worl! 'Ah, Mother,' he says, 'I dinna ken what's wrong, I dinna ken whit's wrong, Mother, wi these eggs, I don't know. Prob'ly they're no richt eggs, I better go an get another two.'

He walkit oot to the shed again, he brung in two duck eggs. But he tried the same — na, they wadna break, the eggs jist would not break in any way in the worl. 'Mother,' he says, 'pit them in a taste o water an bring them a-boill!'

She says, 'That's right, Jack, I never thocht about that.' The aul wumman got a wee pan an the fire wis goin well bi this time of bonnie shore sticks. She pit the pan on an within seconds the water wis boilan, she poppit the two eggs in. An it bubbled an bubbled an bubbled an bubbled an bubbled, an bubbled, she said, 'They're ready noo, Jack.' She tuik them oot — 'crack' — na. As suppose they hed hae tried fir months, they cuidna crack that two eggs.

'Ah, Mother,' he says, 'the're something wrong. Mither, the're something wrong, the're enchantment upon us, that eggs'll no cook. We're gaunna dee wi hunger.'

'Never mind, Jack,' she says, 'eat yir wee bit scone. I'll mak ye a wee drop soup, I'll mak ye a wee pot o soup. Go oot tae the gairden, Jack, an get me a wee taste o vegetables, leeks an a few carrots.'

Noo Jack had a guid garden, he passes all his time makkin a guid garden tae his mother. Ot he goes, he pulls two carrots, a leek, bit parsley an a neep an he brings it tae his mother. Aul wumman washes the pots, pits some water in, pits it on the fire. But she goes tae the table with the knife, but na — every time she touches the carrot, the knife jist skates aff hit. She toucht the leek — it skates aff it an aa. The auld wumman tried her best, an Jack tried his best — there's no way in the world — Jack said, 'That knife's blunt, Mother.'

An Jack had a wee bit o shairpen stane he'd fand in the shoreside, he took the stane an he shairpit the knife, but no way in the world wad hit ever look at the carrots or the neep or the wee bit parsley tae mak a wee pot o soup. She says, 'Jack, the're somethin wrang wi my vegetables, Jack, they must be frozen solid.'

'But,' he said, 'Mother, the're been nae frost tae freeze them! Hoo in the world can this happen?'

'Well,' she says, 'Jack, luik, ye ken I've an awfa cockerels this year, we have an awfa cockerels an we'll no need them aa, Jack. Wad ye gae oot to the shed and pull a cockerel's neck, and A'll pit it in the pot, boil hit for wir supper?'

'Ay,' says Jack. Noo the aul wumman kep a lot o hens. Jack went oot an all i the shed dher wur dozens o them sittin i a raa, cockerels o all description. Jack luikit ti he seen a big fat cockerel sittin on a perch, he put his hand up, catcht hit an he feel'd it, it wis fat. 'Oh,' he says, 'Mother'll be pleased wi this yin.' Jack pullt the neck — na! Pulled again — *no way*. He pullt it, he shakit it, he swung it roond his heid three–five times. He tuik a stick an he battert it i the heid, there's no way — he cuidna touch the cockerel in any way! He pit it bilow his oxter an he walks inta his mother.

She said, 'Ye get a cockerel, Jack?'

'Oh, Mother,' he said, 'I got a cockerel aa right, I got a cockerel. But, Mother, you may care!'

She says, 'What do you mean, laddie?'

'You may care,' he says, 'I cannae kill hit.'

'Ah, Jack,' she says, 'ye cannae kill a cockerel! I ken, ye killt dozens tae me afore, the hens an ducks an aa.'

'Mother,' he said, 'I cannae kill this one — it'll no dee!'

She says, 'Gie me it ower here, gie me it over here!' An the auld woman had a wee hatchet fir splittin sticks, she kep it by the fire. She says, 'Gie it tae me, Jack, I'll show ye the way tae kill it richt!' She pit it doon the top o the block an she hut it wi the hatchet, chop its heid aff. She hut it with the hatchet seventeen times, but no — every time the heid jumpit aff — heid jumpit back on! 'Na, Jack' she says, 'it's nae good. There's something wrang here, the're something terrible gaun a-wrong. Nethin seems tae be richt aboot the place. Here — go out to my purse, laddie, run up tae the village to the butcher! I'm savin this fir a rainy day,' an she tuik a half-croon oot o her purse. 'Jack, gae up tae the butcher an get a wee bit o meat fae the butcher, I'll mak ye a wee bite when ye come back.'

Noo, it wisna far fae the wee hoose to the village, about a quarter o mile Jack hed tae walk. When Jack walkit up the village, all the people were gaihert in the middle o the town square. They're all bletherin an they're chattin and they're bletherin an they're chattin, speakin tae each other. One was sayin, 'A've sprayed ma garden an it's overrun wi caterpillars! An I've tried tae spray hit, it's no good.'

The butcher wis oot wi his apron, he said, 'Three times I tried tae kill a bullock this mornin an three times I killed it, three times it jumpit back on its feet. I don't know what's wrong. The villagers run out o meat! I got a quota o hens in this mornin, ducks, an every time I pull their necks their heads jumps back on. There's somethin terrible is happening!'

Jack went up to the butcher's, he says, 'Gie me a wee bit o meat fir ma mother.'

He says, 'Laddie, there's no a bit o' meat in the shop. Dae ye no ken what I'm tryin' tae tell the people in the village: I've tried ma best this mornin' to kill a young bullock tae supply the village an I cannae kill hit!'

'Well,' Jack said, 'the same thing happen to me — I tried tae boil an egg an I cannae boil an egg, I tried tae kill a cockerel —'

'I tried tae kill ten cockerels,' says the butcher, 'but *they'll no dee!*'

'Oh dear-dear,' says Jack, 'we must be in some kin o' trouble. Is hit happenin' tae other places forbyes this?'

'Well, I jist hed word,' says the butcher, 'the next village up two mile awa an the same thing's happened tae them. Folk cannae even eat an apple — when they sink their teeth inta it, it'll no even bite. They cannae cook a vegetable, they cannae boil water, they cannae dae nothin'! The hale worl's gaunna come tae a standstill, there's something gaen terrible wrong — *nothing seems to die anymore.*'

An then Jack thought in his head, he said, 'It's my fault, I'm the cause o't.' He walkit back an he tellt his mother the same story I'm tellin' you. He says, 'Mother, there's nae butcher meat fir ye.'

She says, 'Why, laddie, why no?'

He says, 'Luik, the butcher cannae kill nae beef, because hit'll no dee.'

'But Jack,' she says, 'why no — it'll no dee? What's wrang with the country, what's wrang with the world?'

He says, 'Mother, it's all my fault!'

'Your fault,' she says, 'Jack?'

'Ay, Mither, it's my fault,' he says. 'Listen, Mother: this morning when you were no feeling very well, I walkit along the shore tae gather some sticks fir the fire an I met Death comin' tae tak ye awa. An I took his scythe fae him an I broke his scythe, I gi'n him a beatin', Mither, an I put him in a nut! An I flung him in the tide an I plugged the nut so's he canna get oot, Mither. An God knows where he is noo. He's floatin' in the sea, Mother, firever an ever an ever, an nothing'll dee — the worl is over-run with caterpillars an worms an everything — Mither, there's nothing can dee! But Mither, I wad rather die with starvation than loss you.'

'Jack, Jack, Jack, laddie,' she says, 'dae ye no ken what ye've done? Ye've destroyed the only thing that keeps the world alive.'

'What do you mean, Mother, "keeps the world alive"? Luik, if I hedna killed him, I hedna hae beat im, Mother, an pit him in that nut — you'd be dead bi this time!'

'I wad be dead, Jack,' she says, 'probably, but the other people would be gettin' food, an the worl'd be gaun on — the way it shuid be — only fir you, laddie!'

'But, Mother,' he says, 'what am I gaunna dae?'

She says, 'Jack, there's only thing ye can dae ... ye're a beach-comber like yir faither afore ye —'

'Aye, Mother,' he says, 'I'm a beach-comber.'

'Well, Jack,' she says, 'there's only thing I can say: ye better gae an get im back an set him free! Because if ye dinnae, ye're gaunna put the whole worl tae a standstill. *Bithout Death there is no life ... fir nobody.*'

'But, Mother,' he says, 'if I set him free, he's gaunna come fir you.'

'Well, Jack, if he comes fir me,' she said, 'I'll be happy, and go inta another world an be peaceful! But you'll be alive an so will the rest o the world.'

'But Mother,' he says, 'I cuidna live bithoot ye.'

'But,' she says, 'Jack, if ye dinnae set him free, *both* o hus'll suffer, an I cannae stand tae see you suffer fir the want o something to eat: because the're nothing in the world will die unless you set him free, because you cannae eat nothing until it's dead.'

Jack thought in his mind fir a wee while. 'Aa right, Mother,' he says, 'if that's the way it shuid be, that's the way it shuid be. Prob'ly I wis wrong.'

'Of course, Jack,' she says, 'you were wrong.'

'But,' he says, 'Mother, I only done it fir yir sake.'

'Well,' she says, 'Jack, fir *my* sake, wad ye search fir that hazelnut an set him free?'

So the next mornin true tae his word, Jack walks the tide an walks the tide fir miles an miles an miles, day out and day in fir three days an fir three days more. He hedna nothin tae eat, he only hed a drink water. They cuidna cook anything, they cuidna eat any eggs, they couldna fry nothing in the pan if they had it, they cuidna make any soup, they cuidna get nothin. The caterpillars an the worms crawled out o the garden in thousands, an they ett every single vegetable that Jack had. An the're nothing in the world — Jack went out an tried to teem hot water on them but it wis nae good. When he teemed hot water on them it just wis the same as he never poored nothing — no way. At last Jack said, 'I must go an find that nut!' So he walkit an he walkit, an he walkit day an he walkit night mair miles than he ever walked before, but no way cuid Jack fin' this nut! Till Jack was completely exhaustit an fed up and completely sick, an he cuidna walk another mile. He sat doon bi the shoreside right in front o his mother's hoose to rest, an wonderit, he pit his hand on his jaw an he said tae his ainsel, 'What have I done? I've ruint the world, I've destroyed the world. People disna know,' he said, 'what Death has so good, at Death is such a guid person. I wis wrong tae beat him an put him in a nut.'

An he's luikin all over — an lo and behold he luikit doon — there at his feet he seen a wee nut, an a wee bit o stick stickin oot hit. He liftit hit up in his hand, an Jack wis happy, happier an he'd ever been in his life before! And he pulled the plug an a wee head poppit oot. Jack held im in his two hands and Death spoke tae him, 'Now, Jack,' he said, 'are ye happy?'

'No,' Jack said, 'I'm no happy.'

He said, 'You thought if you beat me an conquered me an killed me — because I'm jist Death — that that wad be the end, everything be all right. Well, Jack, ma laddie, ye've got a lot to learn, Jack. Without me,' he said, 'there's no life.'

An Jack tuik him oot.

'But,' he says, 'Jack, thank you fir setting me free,' an jist like that, after Jack opent the nut, he cam oot an like that, he cam full strength again an stude before Jack — the same Auld Man with the long ragged coat an the sunken eyes an the two teeth in the front an the bare feet. He says, 'Jack, ye broke my scythe.'

Jack said, 'I'll tell ye somethin, while I wis searchin fir you ma mother made me mend it. An I have it in the hoose fir ye, come wi me!' An Jack led him up to the hoose. Lo an behold sure enough, sittin on the front o the porch wis the scythe that Jack broke. Jack had tuik it an he'd mend't it, he sortit it an made it as guid as ever.

Death cam to the door an he ran his hand doon the face o the scythe, he sput on his thumb and he run it up the face o the scythe, an he says tae Jack, 'I see you've sharpened it, Jack, and ye made a good job o it. Well, I hev some people to see in the village, Jack. But remember, I'll come back fir yir mother someday, but seein you been guid to me I'll make it a wee while!' An Death walkit away.

Jack an his mother lived happy till his mother wis about a hundred years of age! An then one day Death cam back tae take his aul mother away, but Jack never saw him. But Jack was happy fir he knew *there is no life bithout Death*. An that is the end o my story.

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