DARK, SALT, CLEAR

Life in a Cornish fishing town

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To Denise and Lofty,
Don and Isaac

PROLOGUE

The life class model in Newlyn was nothing like the ones I'd come across back home in London. His body bore the marks of a life lived hard – his arms strong and sinewy, his face cross-hatched by wrinkles, his back and biceps scribbled all over with dark blue tattoos. I wanted to believe he had once been a fisherman, but he did not speak to us so I never found out. As we sipped tea there, in the bare studio room of Newlyn Art School up the top of Old Paul Hill, he stood in silence facing the large wooden windows, from where he could have seen the whole of Mount's Bay yawning out in both directions, if only the black night sky had not covered the view.

When he posed for us, he did not curve his body self-consciously across some chaise longue but looked at us head on, legs apart, arms outstretched as if to say: *Here I am*! Observing me as I sketched the man's outline – messily, hungrily, at break-neck speed, rubbing out lines, starting again, failing once more to capture his shape – the art teacher came over and asked me to put down my pencil. When drawing a body, she explained, do not look at the limbs themselves, the shapes and positions you expect the human form to assume, but instead at 'the negative space around them' – the triangles inside the crook of each arm, the crescent that emerges on the other side of where the waist slopes inwards. By following this method the figure will materialise on the paper of its own accord, not how you imagine it ought to appear, but how it really is: the flesh-and-blood person standing before the row of canvases.

I took a breath and relaxed. This was new; there was another way of looking at things.

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It was not until I started drawing that I recognised the way I attempt to take the world in. When I sketch, I want the whole image to appear at once; I push the pencil hard against the paper until it is all but blunt, desperately trying to commit whatever is before me to the page. It is the way I speak, too, bloating each sentence out with as many exhaustive pieces of information as I can to ensure my poor audience does not miss a single moment of what I am trying to conjure.

That bare-boned man, built of so many negative spaces and unresolved marks and shadings, contained in his being all that I was yet to understand about Newlyn. What I had failed to see is that a place is alive; it too is flesh and blood standing before you, arms outstretched, mouth open, ready to call out: *Here I am*! – if only you would pause for a moment to listen.

John Steinbeck articulates the life of places better than any other writer I know, especially in his novella *Cannery Row*. I first read it on the advice of a good friend from Lelant, a village on the north Cornwall coast where the female line of my family has lived for generations. Since returning to London, it is this book that has found itself most frequently in my backpack as I commute, batted like a mouse in a cat's paws from one end of the city to the other to tutor children. I show each child the prologue to *Cannery Row* on our first English session together. I show it to them because I want them to know that there are writers who aren't afraid of admitting the near impossibility of transforming landscapes and people into writing, but who try anyway. I show it to them to remind myself of that same truth as I work on my own writing.

'Cannery Row in Monterey in California,' Steinbeck tells us, 'is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream …' In one breath, he gives us the heavy, industrial percussion of a working fishing village which teems with life, and stinks and grates.

'That doesn't mean *anything*! How can a place be a *stink*?' interrupts one ten-year-old tutee.

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It couldn't be, I tell her, if that were all Steinbeck had written of Cannery Row. Each of these sensations is necessary to the others – the way the light hits the warehouse buildings at different hours, the way the sounds intensify at dawn and fade away at dusk each day in time with the work beginning and ending, the potent stench of fish as it arrives into the factories off the boats, how it feels to stand right in the middle of a place where all these sights and sounds and smells occur together. What it means is that a place is every sense pricked, every sense activated at once.

Next, Steinbeck tells us of the strange, hushed magic left behind each evening, which is nostalgic, which is but a dream once more come the next morning. In this brief description of the workers who daily descend on Cannery Row he teaches us how places are nourished by those who gather in them, whose own multiple, contradictory parts render them just as complex and cosmic as the places themselves.

'How,' the book's narrator finally asks, 'can the poem and the stink and the grating noise – the quality of light, the tone, the habit and the dream – be set down alive?' He answers his own question immediately through a scientific analogy – a nod to Steinbeck's closest friend in California, Ed Ricketts, a marine biologist and the inspiration for Doc, the principal character in *Cannery Row*. Since 'a marine flat worm breaks and falls apart when you try to catch it whole', you must instead 'let them ooze and crawl of their own will onto a knife blade and then lift them gently into your bottle of sea water.' So too, in the telling of place, he advises, can you only 'open the page' and hope 'the stories crawl in by themselves.' After reading *Cannery Row*, I am mindful to greet each part of Newlyn as it finds me, letting it rush into me as the waves do against the ragged Cornish cliffs that stand before the Atlantic like custodians of the land, marking them, softening them, reshaping their boundaries with each rising swell.

A year on from my time in Cornwall, I have only the scruffy brown sugar-paper life drawings from that night at the art school

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to remember the unknown Cornishman by. More than any of the hundreds of photographs or diary entries or recordings I made during my time in Newlyn, it is these drawings that best capture, not just the town, but my relationship to the place, and the chiaroscuro shades it revealed while I found myself in the midst of all that living.

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1

The end of the line

'Do you like cats? Do you mind smoking? And, do you like a drink?'

It did not feel real at first, to be below the soaring ceilings of the scorched-red British Library, surrounded by flocks of tourists gazing up amazed at towers of books encased in glass, and then suddenly to hear, piped into my headphones, the rhythmic sweet timbre of a West Cornish accent. News had passed around the town of Newlyn that a girl from 'upcountry' was seeking lodging, and a couple – Denise and Lofty, who live right by the harbour – had offered their spare room.

Before this could happen, Denise had a couple of questions for me. A student at the table next to me was bashing furiously at his keyboard, so I turned up the volume on my phone to hear her better.

'Could you repeat that?'

'*Do you like cats? Do you mind smoking? And, do you like a drink?*'

Having replied yes, no, and then, very much, yes, it was settled. Denise, a fishmonger, and Lofty, a ship's chandler, would be greeting their first lodger, a twenty-two-year-old Londoner with a distinctly Cornish name at Penzance station in a month's time.

Paddington to Penzance, my ticket read: the beginning of the line to its very end. Virginia Woolf described the Great Western Train magicking her to 'this little corner of England' as 'the wizard who was to transport us into another world, almost into another age.' Every summer of her childhood it was this alchemical

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transformation that took her from the dense streets of London to the sea-edged wildness of north Cornwall. From Talland House, where they stayed each year – a cream building with large bay windows on the outskirts of St Ives – Woolf would have been able to make out the thin outline of Godrevy Lighthouse rising up from a dark mass of rock just off the coast, like a white candle stuck in a slab of cake. The lighthouse held on in her memory, a stubborn after-image that would later become the inspiration for the Scottish lighthouse around which the narrative of *To the Lighthouse* turns.

I have encountered the same magic Woolf experienced on the Great Western train countless times, shutting the pink-and-blue carriage door on bustling Paddington and, five hours later, opening it into the clear, salt-touched air of St Erth, from where my family and I would head on to Lelant for the Easter and summer holidays. All those journeys, my routine so perfected I knew which side of the carriage to sit (always the left, that way you're close to the sea) and when to eat my sandwiches (if I took the 10.03 train, then at Exeter St David's just after 12.00), but I'd never taken the Great Western line the whole of its extent before. Though only one stop further, it felt entirely unlike catching the train to St Erth – as if running over every track possible might provide some sense of finality.

As we pull out of Paddington, I look down the carriage which is now crowded with Easter holiday-goers; brightly coloured surfboards and wrapped-up windbreakers sprout out from behind almost every row of seats. Most of these tourists will leave the train long before we reach Penzance, travelling on from Plymouth, Par and Truro to the popular coastal resorts. You can tell instantly those passengers who are in it for the long haul: they have a certain look, with their books, notepads and snacks spread out the furthest from their laps.

I lean my head against the window and stare out at widening plains of unconcreted space. The last few tower blocks marking London's outskirts fall away. You still feel landscape on a train in a way that you cannot along long, homogenous stretches of

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motorway broken up by embankments, verges and identical-looking service stations.

The line from Paddington to Plymouth was opened in 1849. Back then, fishermen from Newlyn would send their fish in carts down to the station in Plymouth to catch the fast mail train to London. The great channels the Victorian railway engineers tore through the landscape provided nineteenth-century geologists with a view of the earth never seen before. For the first time, they were able to analyse the age lines of rocks long hidden beneath the skin of the land.

By 1859 the tracks the new steam trains travelled along had made it to Truro, crossing the Tamar River on the Cornwall–Devon border via Isambard Kingdom Brunel's Royal Albert Bridge. The bridge is an extraordinary feat of engineering, suspended thirty metres above the Tamar. Its design consists of two lenticular trusses – each an enormous, grey, iron-bound symbol for infinity leaning on its side. Lenticular describes a shape like a stretched oval lens. There are lenticular galaxies, ancient star clusters which have used up almost all of their interstellar matter and are gradually fading out of existence; there are lenticular clouds, too, which, when seen in the dark, look like flying saucers waiting to drop down to earth.

In 1867 the Great Western Railway made it all the way along the 'Cornish Riviera' to Penzance, covering a grand total of 79.5 miles. This line breached the ungoverned spaces between Cornwall and the rest of England, and brought some of the earliest tourists to the county. The Cornish called these new, odd-sounding visitors *emmets*, a term they use for all foreigners – that is, anyone who lives beyond the Tamar.

Newlyn is just on from Penzance along the sea road towards Land's End – where it was once believed the world of men drew to a close. Apart from its location and connection to fishing, I had little experience of the town, beyond the bare car park at the edge of its harbour where my parents would stop briefly at the start of each holiday to pick up fresh fish before we travelled on to more tourist-friendly destinations.

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To provide my destination with some tangible shape I pluck random facts about it from my phone as we start along the final stretch of journey through West Cornwall. The population of Newlyn, coupled with that of neighbouring Mousehole, is around 4,400; Newlyn boasts one of the largest and most profitable fishing ports in the UK; it has five pubs, all within walking distance of each other; the mean gross annual salary in Penzance, of which Newlyn is part, was £26,788 in 2015, compared to £34,265 in England as a whole. In 2017 Cornwall had the tenth highest numbers of people sleeping rough in the country and the third highest suicide rate in the UK. It is the only county poor enough to qualify for EU emergency funding and has an average wage 17 per cent below the rest of the country.

That Penzance is the end of the line is often used to explain the high numbers of rough-sleepers in the area: people end up here because there is no place further to go. The phrase 'end of the line' at once loses its satisfying sense of completion, instead signifying something more oppressive: a lack of other options. This is the first impression I get of the darker shading around Cornwall's peripheries, largely unseen by the second-homers and sun- and beach-seeking tourists attracted to the county each year in their thousands.

The holiday crowds have thinned out by the time we enter the final, halting stages of our journey, the gaps between stops shrinking to a matter of minutes. When we come to St Erth I notice the absence of my family sat across from me. I close my eyes and try to forget my nerves about my new home, instead imagining what it would be like to flee the train now – to go where I know, where it is safe and certain. I let my mind blow briefly onto Lelant's melancholy stretch of sand. Lelant beach is where my mother and I have always got on best. Whatever mother–daughter fight we were in the midst of would cease as we launched ourselves through the curtain of marram grass that pulls apart to reveal the beach below the sand dunes. The place where our understandings have met, our lives briefly aligning

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along the shell line running parallel to the sea, with its long streak of purple and green mussels, cochlea-curled sea-snail homes, and light pink shell halves, joined together by a hinge, which she calls fairy wings.

The train crosses over to the south coast, leaving St Ives Bay behind. I receive a text from Denise saying she'll be wearing a blue-striped top so I can identify her at the station. I look down at my own blue striped top, not sure if I'm embarrassed or amused by the coincidence and send her a message back saying: 'Me too! See you soon.' Later she will tell me that a weary-looking middle-aged woman in a blue-striped jumper came out of the station just before me, leading Lofty to joke: 'Maybe the kids from London start looking older earlier.'

The sea – which on oceanographic maps is not the same Celtic Sea that I had thrown myself into each holiday in Lelant on the north coast but is now the English Channel – appears through the train window and with it, the magisterial, fog-ringed outline of St Michael's Mount, an island just off the coast you can only reach by foot when the tide is low enough to reveal the granite causeway connecting it to the land. We chase along the shoreline, past the large green-grey corrugated-iron structures that make up Long Rock industrial estate, and begin to slow down for the final stretch into the station. The buffer stops at a line's end never seem very convincing to me: the tracks slope upwards to meet them, as if tempting the driver to take the train on to further dimensions once the passengers have departed.

As I drag my case along the empty carriage and step down onto the platform, all I can see in front of me is a rusted vending machine emptied of snacks and a passengers' waiting room with a few rows of plastic-backed chairs. Though I have tried numerous times since to conjure up the image of us regarding one another as strangers, I cannot remember what it felt like to see Denise and Lofty for the first time. When I try to think of them standing there just inside the arced cover of Penzance station, side by side – Denise little, strong and tanned, with shoulder-length brown hair; Lofty in his work fleece and, true to his name,

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the tallest head amongst those waiting at the station – the image fractures: I imagine Denise erupting into the mischievous expression that spreads across her whole face just before she is about to play a prank on some unsuspecting friend, and the way in which Lofty's booming, open-mouthed laugh joins in with hers, revealing his missing front tooth.

Driving away from the station, I turn my head to look through the rear window and watch as St Michael's Mount disappears behind the evening sea mist that encroaches upon the bay.

The sky is fired red with its last light as we drive over Newlyn Bridge – passing on our left the large, grey-walled fish market and car park packed with heavy-duty lorries, behind which I can just make out the tall, pale masts of fishing boats swaying like a forest of leafless trees. Denise swivels round in her seat to point out an inviting-looking mustard-yellow building across from the harbour, the warm glow emanating from its windows drawing squares of gold on the pavement, with several dark figures standing at its entrance smoking. 'That's the Star, our local. You'll find yourself in there soon, no doubt,' she winks.

We turn off the main road to snake our way through the alleyways that make up Newlyn's fishermen's quarter and park alongside a small front garden decorated with potted plants. Through a low doorway, under which Lofty has to duck, is an immaculately kept cottage with a living room that opens out onto a patio garden facing the harbour. From the sofa, two of the biggest cats I have ever seen eye me with suspicion as Lofty and I strain to drag my huge case up the narrow stairs to my new room.

That night we sit together in the lounge, trays piled high with buttery baked potatoes balanced on our laps, engaging in uncertain, polite chatter in the silences between the soaps playing on the TV. Worn out from the journey and my mind's ruminating doubts about the coming stay, I finish as much of the meal as I can and head up to bed. Out in the darkness below my window, I hear the low clunking of heavy machinery, as crates of fish

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are unloaded from boats to be weighed and prepared in the market for the dawn auction, and a couple of nocturnal seagulls squawking over fish guts. A strong wind picks up and whips through the alley. Above it all I hear the sea, raging against the harbour walls.

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