PROLOGUE

Under whirring helicopter blades, a young woman holds her newborn baby as she is pushed in a wheelchair along the runway of the island airport to meet a man in a strait-jacket being pushed in a wheelchair from the other direction.

That day, the two twenty-eight-year-olds had been treated at the small hospital nearby. The woman was helped to deliver her first child. The man, shouting and out of control, was restrained and sedated.

Orkney – a group of islands at the north of Scotland, sea-scoured and wind-battered, between the North Sea and the Atlantic – has a good provision of services: hospital, airport, cinema, two secondary schools, a supermarket. One thing it does not have, however, is a secure unit for people certified mentally ill and a

danger to themselves and others. If someone is sectioned under the Mental Health Act, they have to be taken south to Aberdeen.

Seen from above, from an aircraft carrying oil workers out to a rig or mail bags from mainland Scotland, the airport runway is a jolt on the open, treeless landscape. Regularly closing for days during high winds or sea fogs, it's where the daily drama of leaving and return is played out under air-traffic control, among the low-lying isles and far-reaching skies.

This May evening, as daisies shut their petals for the night, guillemots and kittiwakes return to the cliffs with sand eels for their chicks, and sheep shelter beside drystone dykes – it is my story's turn to unfold. As I arrive into this island world, my father is taken out of it. My birth, three weeks early, has brought on a manic episode.

My mum introduces the man – my dad – to his tiny daughter and briefly places me in his lap before he is taken into the aircraft and flown away. What she says to him is covered by the sound of the engine or carried off by the wind.

I

THE OUTRUN

On my first day back I shelter beside an old freezer, down by some stinging nettles, and watch the weather approach over the sea. The waves crashing do not sound very different from the traffic in London.

The farm is on the west edge of the main and largest island in Orkney, on the same latitude as Oslo and St Petersburg, with nothing but cliffs and ocean between it and Canada. As agricultural practices changed, new buildings and machinery were added to the farm but the old sheds and tools remain, corroding in the salty air. A broken tractor shovel acts as a sheep trough. Stalls where cattle were once tied are now filled with defunct machinery and furniture that used to be in our house. In that byre I strung a rope swing from the rafters, and hung backwards by my knees over a gate that's now rusting into the ground.

To the south, the farm stretches along the shore to sandier land, which becomes the Bay of Skaill, a mile-long beach

where the Stone Age village, Skara Brae, sits. To the north, the farm follows cliffs up to higher ground where heather grows. Each field has a prosaic name: 'front field', as you come up the track to the house; or 'lambing field', sheltered on all sides by drystone dykes. The largest of the fields, the 'Outrun', is a stretch of coastland at the top of the farm where the grass is always short, pummelled by wind and sea spray year-round. The Outrun is where the ewes and their lambs graze in summer after they are taken up from the nursery fields. It's where the Highland cattle overwinter, red and horned, running out under the huge sky.

Some historical agricultural records list farmland in two parts: the 'in-bye' arable land, close to the farm steading; and the 'out-bye' or 'outrun', uncultivated rough grazing further away, often on hillsides. In the past, outrun was sometimes used as communal grazing for a number of farms. This land is the furthest reaches of a farm, only semi-tamed, where domestic and wild animals co-exist and humans don't often visit so spirit people are free to roam. In Orcadian folklore, trowies are told to live in communities in mounds and hollows of the hills and there are tales of hillyans, little folk who emerge from the rough land to make mischief in the summer.

In a photo of the Outrun from the early eighties, I ride on Dad's shoulders as he and Mum show visiting English friends the desolate-seeming land they have bought. My parents wanted to buy a farm and kept travelling further north until they found one they could afford. Family and friends were surprised, and unsure if they could make it work, as were the locals. Orcadians had

watched many idealistic southerners move to the islands only to leave after a couple of winters.

I grew up here next to these cliffs. I have never been afraid of heights. Dad would take us clifftop-walking as children. I'd shake free of Mum's hand and look over the edge at the churning water below. Grey flagstone – sheer drops and massive slabs – fringes the farm, and this monumental material and unforgiving forces formed the limits of the island and my world.

We had a dog once that went over. The collie pup set off chasing rabbits in a gale, did not notice the drop and was never seen again.

It's a windy day. I leave the shelter of the freezer and walk up to the Outrun for the first time in years, breathing deeply. There are no trees on the farm and in this open landscape there is an abundance of space.

All the rocks slope towards the sea. In my wellies, I walk along the cracks in the flagstones so I don't slip. Wisps of hair have blown free of my ponytail and are getting into my eyes and mouth, sticking to my face with sea spray, like when I was a kid and followed the sheepdogs, under gates and over dykes.

I find my favourite place: a slab of rock balanced at a precarious angle at the top of a cliff. I'd come here as a teenager, headphones on, dressed up and frustrated, looking out to the horizon, wanting to escape. From my spot on the stone I would watch the breakers crash, the gulls and fighter jets flying out over the sea.

On a clear day, south across the Pentland Firth, I can see the tips of the mountains of mainland Scotland from here: Ben Hope,

Ben Loyal, Cape Wrath. About the horizon's distance due west of the Outrun lies Sule Skerry, once home to Britain's most remote manned lighthouse. Out at sea, bobbing on the surface, I can make out wave-energy devices being tested by engineers. It's low tide and below me, at the base of the cliff, the rocks are exposed where a fishing boat came aground when I was eleven.

From my seat on the slab, I look north to the headland at Marwick, with its tower built in memorial to Lord Kitchener. In 1916, Kitchener died with 643 of his crew of 655 when HMS *Hampshire* went down two miles north-west of here, sunk by a mine from a German U-boat. Some of the twelve survivors were given shelter in the farmhouse that later would be ours.

In his account of the loss of the *Hampshire*, one survivor, W. M. Phillips, a sailor, vividly describes the night of the tragedy: 'I with my boots off, but otherwise fully clad, jumped, and with a last goodbye plunged into seething waters.' He was able to climb onto a large float and gives an account of how, since it was overloaded, those wearing lifebelts were 'asked to leave': 'With a few smiling remarks such as "We shall be there first", some 18 answered the call and plunged into the billows, thus sacrificing themselves to give their fellow shipmates their only possible chance of survival.'

After many hours when the sailors feared being dashed to their deaths on the rocks, the float came ashore in one of the geos – Nebbi Geo – on the Outrun. Walking this stretch of

coast, I imagine the raft, as Phillips described, 'wedged in between the cliffs as if human hands had placed it there'. I picture farmers of the time searching the coastline in the dark for survivors, and the bodies of sailors strewn on the rocks.

The wind in Orkney is almost constant. At the farm, the westerly gales are the worst, bringing the sea with them, and tonnes of rock can be moved overnight, the map altered in the morning. Easterlies can be the most beautiful – when the wind blows towards the tide and skims a glittering canopy of spray from the top of the waves, catching the sun. The old croft houses are squat and firm, like many Orcadian people, built to survive the strongest gales. That sturdy balance has not been bred into me: I am tall and gangly.

Following the familiar coast, I'm trying not to feel unstable. It's been more than a decade since I lived here and memories from my childhood are merging with more recent events: the things that brought me back to Orkney. As I struggle to open a wire gate, I remember what I repeated to my attacker: 'I am stronger than you.'

At the end of a winter the land is brown and washed-out and the Outrun seems barren, but I know its secrets. A broken-down and overgrown boundary dyke was found to date back to the Neolithic Age and some of the stones that make up the Ring of Brodgar six miles away were from a quarry just north of here. One similar stone lies broken on the hillside – perhaps

dropped on the way to the circle four thousand years ago. I remember the colony of Arctic terns that nested here, dive-bombing our heads during the breeding season, swooping close enough for us to feel their wings. The endangered great yellow bumblebee is found here in the summer, pollinating the red clover; magic mushrooms grow in the autumn; and a rare type of seaweed, *Fucus distichus*, unique to wave-battered rocky northern shores, grows on the rocks all year round.

At the top of the Outrun there is a sea stack known as 'the Spord' or 'the Stack o' Roo', a tower-block-sized rock that was once part of the cliff but now stands alone. In the summer, puffins nest on the stack, along with fulmars, shags, black-backed gulls and ravens. Carefully avoiding rabbit holes, I used to clamber down a grass slope to a ledge, the best place to tuck myself in, look across to the stack and watch the bustling seabird society – fulmars noisily defending their nests and puffins returning from far out at sea.

There are no fences on the Outrun to keep the sheep off the rocks and cliffs. In the early years of the farm, Dad climbed down and rescued ewes that got stuck on ledges, but as the flock matured, geographical knowledge and foot-sureness was bred into the bloodline.

After recent rain, the burn that runs down to the sea is flowing, where my brother Tom and I played, pushing ourselves and the dogs under a small stone bridge. Oystercatchers and curlews made nests in the tracks left by the tractor and we'd chase and catch the chicks, feeling their soft, hotly beating bodies in our hands before letting them go.

I stop at the place where, when I was a kid, a neighbour left his new tractor running while he jumped out to open a gate and neglected to pull on the handbrake. He was turned the other way as the tractor began to roll, driverless, down the sloping field. He could not run fast enough to catch it as it accelerated and, with unstoppable force, the expensive machine plunged over the edge of the cliff and smashed into the Atlantic.

Later in the afternoon, I come back up to the Outrun to feed the Highland cattle, squeezing in next to Dad in the cab of his tractor, the way I used to when I was small. I still know where the bumps and dips in the land are so I can hold on tightly when necessary. Dad lowers the loader holding the silage bale into the ring-feeder and the kye gather around. It's already dark and I stay in the cab and watch him, lit by the tractor headlights, cutting the thin black plastic off the bale and pulling it away so they can eat. His hair is mainly white now, and although he wears a padded boiler suit almost year round, he no longer needs gloves.

The Outrun is tucked away behind a low hill and beside the coast, and in the right spot you can't see any houses or be seen from the road. Dad told me that when he was high, in a manic phase, he had slept out here. At the end of the day, crouched away from the wind beside the freezer again, rolling a cigarette and eyeing the livestock, I have become my father.

2

TREMORS

When I get back from my walk on the Outrun, instead of entering the farmhouse I go to the machinery paddock and open the door to the caravan where Dad now lives. The sheepdog waits outside for him and the horses have their heads over the gate, looking for hay. The old caravan is weighted down with concrete blocks against the wind. One of the windows was blown out in a gale last winter and has been patched up with a wooden sheet.

Inside, Dad is wearing his outdoor boiler suit, with baler twine and a penknife always in the pockets, over a jumper that Mum knitted, which he still wears, now patched at the elbows. He's sitting in the upholstered corner seat with the best view out through the large Perspex window, across the farmyard and fields, over the bay to a headland. The colours of the sky and the light on the sea change all day as rapid Atlantic weather systems pass over. When the clouds break, sunlight dazzles on the water. An

outcrop of rock is exposed at low tides. Sometimes the light picks out in fine detail the hills of Hoy, another island to the south beyond the headland, and on other days they disappear completely in the haar.

In a shaft of winter sun, the air is dusty with muck from outside and smoke from the roll-ups Dad smokes. There are outdoor clothes and wellies by the door, farm paperwork spread over the low table, and the glow of a gas fire. At the other end of the caravan is a bedroom and the dog sleeps directly below Dad, under the caravan, like a wolf in its cave.

'Did you feel anything up there?' Dad asks, before beginning to tell me, although I've heard it before, about the tremors. This stretch of cliffs and beaches, where the mythical Mester Muckle Stoorworm is first said to have made himself known, where the people of Skara Brae eked out their lives and where HMS *Hampshire* was sunk, has mysteries.

Some people on the west coast of Orkney, including Dad, say they experience tremors or booms sometimes, low echoes that seem strong enough to vibrate the whole island while at the same time being quiet enough to make them wonder if they imagined it. 'You hardly hear it, but feel it more,' says Dad. 'It's a low-grade boom, like thunder at a distance. There are vibrations of the ground enough to shake windows and shelves. It lasts for one pulse and is often repeated a few times in a couple of hours.' Locals say they have felt the booms over many years but are unable to identify a pattern to their occurrence. They wonder if it is geographical, man-made, even supernatural – or if it happens at all.

To understand the tremors I have to look deep within Orkney's topography. The geology of the West Mainland coast, with high cliffs at Marwick, Yesnaby and Hoy, strewn with the sea stacks, sloping rocks and treacherous currents responsible for many shipwrecks, is the first place to look. It is possible that the booms and tremors are caused by wave action within caves deep below the fields. As a large wave travels into a dead-end cave, it traps and compresses air at high pressure. When the wave retreats, the air bubble explodes, causing a boom.

Others blame the tremors on the military, and sonic booms produced by jet aircraft. Around sixty miles from Orkney, on mainland Scotland, the Cape Wrath Ministry of Defence range is where the military train on and offshore. This sparsely populated area is one of the few places in the UK where the 'big stuff' can be detonated. Heavy air weapons would be the only thing that could send a sonic wave as far as Orkney but wind conditions would have to be perfect. High-speed aircraft can also cause sonic booms as, on dive-bombing runs, they descend into denser air, but although Dad sometimes sees and hears the planes, he says the tremors do not come at the same time. I wonder if other, harder to grasp, even ghostly, island forces could be at play. The legend of Assipattle and the Mester Muckle Stoorworm tells of a huge sea monster, so large it could wrap its body around the world and destroy cities with a flick of its tongue. A layabout called Assipattle dreamed of saving the world and got his chance when he killed the Stoorworm by stuffing a burning peat into its liver, cooking it slowly from the inside. Writhing in agony, the Stoorworm thrashed its head, knocking

out hundreds of its teeth, which formed the islands of Orkney, Shetland and the Faroes. Dragging itself to the edge of the earth, it curled up and died, its smouldering body becoming Iceland – a country full of hot springs, geysers and volcanoes. That liver is still burning so maybe the Stoorworm isn't dead at all. A tentacle may still be twitching around these shores and the tremors may be the aftershocks of the monster's death-throes.

Talking to Dad about the tremors, I feel slightly nervous. Our conversations are normally limited to the farm – what jobs need to be done or the condition of the sheep and the land – so hearing him speak about uncanny sensations and strange geology makes me concerned that he might be getting high. Mum taught me to look for the signs. At first it could be exciting, with Dad talking a lot, full of optimism and energy, but this would bubble over into his making impulsive purchases, such as expensive rams or farm equipment, staying up all night and moving animals at four in the morning, then grandiose thoughts, with him feeling he could change time and control the weather.

On the floor of the caravan there's a stool I remember from the farmhouse that Dad made in the hospital when he was a teenager. He was fifteen when he was first diagnosed with manic depression, now known as bipolar disorder, and schizophrenic tendencies. Since then, periodically, he has ups and downs of varying amplitude. Our family life was rocked by the waves of life at its extremes, by the cycles of manic depression. As well

as the incidents with sectioning and straitjackets, followed by time away in a psychiatric hospital, there were months when he stayed in bed without saying a word. Today Dad is buoyant but, on other occasions, if he's subdued, I worry it may signal the beginning of a period of depression and one of his long winters of inactivity.

Once, when I was about eleven, Dad was so ill that he went round the farmhouse smashing all the windows one by one. The wind flew through the rooms, whisking my schoolwork from my desk. When the doctor arrived with tranquillisers, followed by the police and an ambulance, I yelled at them to go away. He'd been taken by something beyond his control. As the sedatives kicked in, I crouched with my father in a corner of my bedroom, sharing a banana. 'You are my girl,' he said.

The rumblings of mental illness under my life were amplified by the presence of my mother's extreme religion and by the landscape I was born into, the continual, perceptible crashing of the sea at the edges. I read about the 'shoaling process' – how waves increase in height, then break as they reach shallower water near the shore. Energy never expires. The energy of waves, carried across the ocean, changes into noise and heat and vibrations that are absorbed into the land and passed through the generations.

Since his teens, Dad has been treated on fifty-six occasions with electroconvulsive therapy. Used in the most severe cases of mental illness, an electric shock is passed into the brain to induce a seizure. No one quite knows how or why it works but patients often report feeling better afterwards, at least temporarily.

Ripples were set off the day I was born, and although I moved

far away, the seizures I began to experience as my drinking escalated felt as if the tremors had caught up with me too. In lonely London bedrooms or in toilets at nightclubs, my wrists and jaw would freeze and my limbs wouldn't respond as usual. The alcohol I'd been pouring into myself for years was like the repeated action of the waves on the cliffs and it was beginning to cause physical damage. Something was crumbling deep within my nervous system and shook my body in powerful pulses to the extent that I was frozen and drooling, until they eased off enough for me to pour another drink or rejoin the party.

3

FLOTTA

Even on the brightest day in Orkney there is a cool breeze that comes in from the sea. It reminds us that we are on an island, although we call the biggest island in the archipelago the 'Mainland' while everything else is just 'south'. As soon as the agricultural shows are over at the beginning of August, so is summer, and there are regular gales for the rest of the year. Autumn is brief, there are few trees, and winter blows in quickly.

A decade ago, in a September equinox wind, I came home for a few months – a graduate unable to find a job in the city. It was the year my parents split up, like many people's do, and, like most, I didn't think it would happen to mine, although perhaps it's surprising that a manic depressive and a born-again Christian stayed together so long.

I was working as a cleaner at the oil terminal on the island of Flotta and took the workers' ferry across from the pier at

Houton every day at dawn. Since the early seventies, pipelines and tankers have brought crude oil to the terminal from North Sea oil fields, dark energy from below the seabed. The oil industry was a boost for Orkney and provides some of its best-paid jobs but the cleaners were at the bottom of the pile.

The commute was the best thing about the job. Each day I drove across the island at sunrise and returned at sunset. Misty pastels appeared as I accelerated over the horizon listening to Radio Orkney or drum-and-bass, framing the islands and reflecting in the water of Scapa Flow. There were electric reds and oranges in the evening, the same colour as the flare that burns off excess gas at the terminal and the lights on the oil tankers out at sea.

After work, when I took off my tabard but never quite got rid of the smell of bleach, I spent nights on my own – Mum had recently moved out and Dad was elsewhere – in the farmhouse where I grew up. I was alone in a house on the edge of a cliff, drinking and smoking at the kitchen table where we used to have family meals, doing a job I didn't want, phoning my far-away friends at midnight while drinking Dad's homebrew, as my family came apart around me. Sometimes I would finish one bottle of wine, then drive five miles to the nearest open shop to get another. The next day I'd get on the ferry, headphones on, hung-over, furious and hurting.

At the oil terminal, I had to clean workers' bedrooms, mop bathrooms, sweep corridors and make beds. I became familiar with different types of dirt: from sweat on sheets, unseen but smelt, to dry footprint mud, satisfyingly hooverable. Toothpaste

flecks on mirrors revealed the enthusiastic brusher, and ash showed who had been smoking out of the window in a non-smoking area. Dry and wet poo, ably distinguished by my supervisor, required different cleaning methods, and pubic hairs were left coiled on toilet seats. Most of the rooms I cleaned contained partially drunk bottles of Irn-Bru and some had finger- and toenail clippings buried in the carpet.

I felt as if I had become a ghost, walking nameless corridors under buzzing lights carrying a mop. The world out there, down south, had forgotten about me, stuck on the island with the bin bags, struggling to get a laundry cart through swing doors on my own. I was the wall that had eyes, knowing if workers had slept in their beds last night. I was the shadowy figure, scuttling away when I heard footsteps. Being back in Orkney was a failure and I saw the cleaning job as simply a way to make money to leave again.

At eighteen, I couldn't wait to leave. I saw life on the farm as dirty, hard and badly paid. I wanted comfort, glamour and to be at the centre of things. I didn't understand people who said that they wanted to live in the country where they could see wildlife. People were more interesting than animals. In the winter, forced into ugly outdoor clothes to help muck out the livestock, I dreamed of the hot pulse of the city.

But in my student flat, I would mentally map the 150 acres of the farm onto the inner city, thousands of people in the space

that contained just our family and animals. It drove me crazy that, in a block of flats, I was existing just metres from someone yet didn't know who they were. Other people were sleeping through thin walls to the left and right of me, above and below. I didn't talk much about Orkney to my new friends, but lying in bed on windy nights, the noise made me feel as if I was back in the stone farmhouse and I thought of the animals outside in the cold.

When I was in the south it was easiest for me to say that I was 'Scottish' or 'come from Orkney' but that was not what I would say to a real Orcadian. Although I was born in Orkney and lived there until I was eighteen, I don't have an Orcadian accent and my family is from England. My parents met when they were eighteen, at college in Manchester, where Dad was retaking the A levels he'd missed due to his first bouts of illness and Mum was studying business. Mum grew up on a farm in Somerset, Dad is the son of teachers from Lancashire and was brought up in a Mancunian suburb. It was visits to Mum's farm that made him decide to go to agricultural college. My parents have lived on the islands for more than thirty years, over half their lives, yet are still viewed as English, from 'south'.

Usually, English people think that my accent is Scottish and Scottish people think I am English. The old Orcadian way to ask someone where they come from: 'Where do you belong?' My parents heard that often when they first arrived. I might come from Orkney but I often didn't feel it was where I belonged. At primary school, 'English' was a term of abuse.

When I was little, the only black kid at the secondary

school went missing. He lived up near the cliffs of Yesnaby. His younger brother came on our primary-school bus and the adults talked seriously at the bus stops. A week or so later his body was found washed up at the beach. My playground experiences made me assume that racism had driven him to the cliff.

As an adolescent I didn't want to become part of what I saw as a subtle conspiracy to present Orkney as an island paradise. Tourist information proclaimed the beauty and history, endlessly reproducing pictures of the standing stones or the pretty winding street of Stromness when what I saw was boring buildings and grey skies. But although I regularly complained about Orkney, I was on the defence as soon as someone else was sceptical of its charms.

It's a push and a pull familiar to many young people from the islands. We ended up back here again and again, washed back, like the inevitable tide. I grew up in the sky, with an immense sense of space, yet limited by the confines of the island and the farm. On a day off from cleaning, the wind was in my hair down at the harbour in Kirkwall, which smelt of fish and diesel; out to sea, lights twinkled on the low hills of the north islands, Shapinsay, Sanday, and beyond them, over the horizon, Papa Westray. I was conspicuous and discontent in that small town after having lived away.

When we were teenagers we mocked the tourists. This World Heritage Site was our home, not just somewhere holidaymakers could buy tickets to see. After hours, when the coach tours had left, my brother, friends and I climbed into the stone Neolithic

houses and tombs, with fingerless gloves and disposable cameras. In the morning the attendant would find burned-out tea-lights and empty wine bottles.

I was a physically brave and foolhardy child. I climbed up stone dykes and onto shed roofs. I threw my body from high rafters onto hay or wool bags below. Later I plunged myself into parties – alcohol, drugs, relationships, sex – wanting to taste the extremes, not worrying about the consequences, always seeking sensation and raging against those who warned me away from the edge. My life was rough and windy and tangled.

Growing up in the wind leaves you strong, sloped and adept at seeking shelter. I was far away when the farmhouse was sold, the value of the farm and our home split between my parents. Dad kept the farm and installed a caravan there for the nights he wasn't staying with his girlfriend, while Mum bought a house in town and rarely visited the farm again.

Mum was a farmer's wife and a farmer's daughter but also a farmer herself. As well as doing all the cooking and housework for the family, she drove tractors, mucked out cattle, built fences and dykes, and filled in the potholes in the farm track again and again. She and Dad worked together to dose the sheep with wormer and clip the feet of the ones with foot-rot, and to pick the stones, which each year worked their way up from the earth's mantle, from the ploughed fields before the barley was sown. Dad sheared the sheep, then Mum rolled the fleeces into tight bundles. After the divorce, she missed the farm terribly but it was too hard to visit.

★ ★ ★

Every cleaner was female and every room that we cleaned was occupied by a man. These women cleaned and scrubbed and washed all day at work, then went home and did the same for their husbands and children, and had done for years. They were experts. As I watched my supervisor's finesse with the mop, how she squeezed at just the right pressure and angle for optimum water and bubbles, I knew I would never achieve such skill. I thought that the firemen on the island were capable of doing their own laundry and changing their own beds.

As I paired up grizzled socks, threw away discarded pornography and cleaned toilets, I wondered if I would be happier if I had never left. Would it be easier if I'd married someone I'd gone to school with and stayed off the internet, if there had been less of a gap between my aspirations and reality? I thought about my mum. Maybe she had wanted more too. She was not much older than me when she found herself with two kids, abandoned on the day she gave birth and many times after that. She was a capable and caring woman, pushed to her limit on a cliffside farm on a strange island.

Mum turned to the Church when my brother and I were small and she was looking after a farm and toddlers while her husband was in a psychiatric ward two hundred miles away, across the sea. Once she had to sell the whole sheep flock because she couldn't manage them on her own and didn't know when Dad would be back. They thought that might be the end for the farm but they managed to piece it back together. In many ways, her faith kept the family going for a long time but, later, it was part of what broke it up.

Dad would say the modern, evangelical Church found her, preyed on and brainwashed her. She would say she was saved. It depends who I'm speaking to as to which side I agree with. I remember people from the Church helping out and decorating our living room while Dad was in hospital. He remembers coming back and finding new Bibles and religious books in the house, in their bedroom.

As the days grew shorter, it was dark when I left home to go to Flotta in the morning and when I returned at night. At the end of Orkney's long, bleak winter I was fading, hiding in the shadows. One afternoon, carrying my Hoover up a glass stairway, I walked into a shaft of sunlight. I looked around to see if it was safe, and lay down on the carpet, the light warming my hair.

Another day, when my supervisor found me crying in the toilets, not for the first time, she told me, with the kindest intentions, I had to leave: this was obviously not where I wanted to be. With my next wage slip, they sent me off on the workers' boat for the last time. A few days later, I walked into each room of the farmhouse, saying goodbye, before leaving with a rucksack and a one-way ticket for London.