

I know where I'm going

By Jane Feather

Though they'd come this way by daylight, it was a different proposition in the dark. At this distance, all that distinguished the cottage was the lozenge of light in the storm porch, and, to the left, the small carpark, long deserted, its board of regulations like a ghostly flag. When she turned away there was no light at all. This was a test of her mettle; it would show him the extent to which she'd made the place her own. There was a briny stench, a sponginess to the air. If she aimed straight out she'd hit the dunes; keep going, and sooner or later she'd arrive at the sea. Then what? She was hopeful that he'd follow her out. This would be the story: he'd bide his time – long enough to give her a fright – but then appear from the gloom like a piece of the landscape broken off.

There were no stars; a sea fret ballooned towards her. As the tarmac gave out, her footsteps made a muffled sound like slippers. The ground crumbled where she trod. She remembered the pot-holes: you could twist an ankle if you weren't careful. Banks of sand loomed ahead of her. She shuffled more cautiously, determined not to go back, not yet. The air scooted round, hissing in her ears. It tasted of the langoustines they'd picked up from a doorstep on the road out of Kilchoan, that first day, when everything was heaven. He'd brought her here, to this undulating stretch of sand and marram grass, pronouncing the word for her, *machair*, and they'd watched the sun dissolve into the sea, gilding the water, the sand. *Machair*: it was a different word again in the dark, as if she could climb inside, dense and furry as a jumper.

She was groggy from three nights of drinking more than she should. Her breath was shallow and came in little puffs. He will find me, she said to herself, believing it. He'd come and fetch her and bring her home, and they'd sit together watching the fire burn out, easy and companionable as two old dogs.

She veered to the left, fumbling towards what looked like a gulley in the dunes. Earlier they'd found a sheep upturned in the receding tide, its legs like furniture, drowned in its own fleece. Her heart was banging. It was more like climbing than walking. She climbed until the near horizon dropped away and the buzz of ocean was suddenly upon her. She spilled down the bank of sand, ankle deep, blown-open by a wind that shot straight in off the sea. Her hair whipped her face. There was no sign of him, of anyone. Her brain whirred. *All is not lost. It is only a test.* He'd come and find her so that the night could disarm them both and knock their heads together.

He'd been two years ahead of her at Oxford, but had seemed much older, man-sized and swarthy in his second-hand suit. He could have been straight out of an Italian film, but his accent was from Glasgow, a low, seductive drawl, full of gravel and honey. Most nights he could be found holding court in the pool room of the Royal Oak. What was she reading? he'd ask, sitting out a game to suggest new words, books that she should read. *The fury of men's gullets, and their groins:* where's that from? – every cell in her body, fired and jumping.

The cottage belonged to his mother. Sanna, the place was called, and in his mouth it had sounded like a bell, a call to prayer.

I Know Where I'm Going was her favourite film she must have told him: the girl who takes the train up to the Scottish islands but is diverted by a whirlpool and a laird.

The girl he took home would be the girl he'd marry, he said, licking his Rizla paper and eyeing her as if to say, *no chance!*

There'd been a moment, a drunken evening in her final year. He'd been abroad, and had turned up out of the blue, visiting old haunts, he'd said. In her room in the attic of the shared house they'd stripped themselves of clothes – practically, no fuss – and she'd climbed into her narrow bed, pressed to the wall, too beside herself to sleep, his naked back looming before her like a whale's, pores breathing sweetly of hops and heat. She hardly dared touch him, not with her hands. In the morning she could smell the rankness of her nerves, worrying that if she moved he'd smell them too, lying awake until the rest of the house dispersed, and he could make his getaway.

Much later, when she was living back in London, she'd listen sleeplessly to the radio turned down low – *Mull of Galloway to Mull of Kintyre, Mull of Kintyre to Ardnamurchan Point* – and picture him out in the squall, a lamp lifted for her arrival.

She'd tracked him down on an old number, badgering away at him with her land-girl spirit, as if it was a joke. She was surprised at how readily he gave in. Yes, okay, he'd said, she could come and visit, as long as she travelled as he did on the *Nite-rider*. *Shite-rider* he'd called it, the overnight coach up to Glasgow. And precisely because she wasn't his kind of girl – not beautiful or mysterious enough – she leapt at this chance to prove herself.

At Buchanan station, sick with anticipation, she'd doubted suddenly that he'd be there. But, standing aloof, propped against a concrete pillar, it could only be him,

lifting an elbow to acknowledge that he'd seen her. Her legs were gone: if she didn't concentrate she'd topple to one side and he would disappear. She was full of the story: the smell of piss and burning rubber, the boy who'd sat next to her swigging vodka, his shaven head like a croquet ball against her shoulder.

The blue Renault belonged to his mother. The tug of the seat belt, its clasp, his hand on the gear stick, mirror, signal. It was real. And the glorious domesticity of stopping off at Asda, the trolley rattling with two weeks' worth of *Irn Bru*, oats, bog roll, neaps. They were the Bonnie and Clyde of the drudging, pasty-faced shoppers. The booze had an aisle all to itself, and he was expert. This particular malt. Three bottles. Four. A dozen bottles of wine. And the tin cans came in multi-storeys, in stiff plastic wrap, in tartan. This was Scotland! The trolley clanked and bucked on its wheels. At the checkout, though no-one had batted an eye, she imagined it must look as if they were having a party.

There was a zero quality to the air on this peninsular that made everything new, her life before, the cave-life of a grub. In three days they'd rustled up a routine: he'd make a pan of porridge in the morning to set them up for a walk that could last all day. He hadn't dissuaded her from tagging along, the knapsack clanking on his back as they climbed up onto the ridge to follow the sheep track, the sea tugging at their periphery, seabirds wheeling from their roosts.

Every half hour or so he'd call a halt, a suitable spot, he'd say, for a *tinnie* break. His rules. They'd hunker down out of the wind, and he'd crack open a can, use her as a shield to roll a fag, its dog-end soggy from his lips, pressed between hers. That first day the sea had been Mediterranean, the blue as vibrant as a mirage or a solder that promised to fuse them together.

Two nights in a row he'd cooked haggis and neaps, and she enthused as if she'd be happy to eat haggis and nothing but. The fire was lit, whisky – though she hadn't acquired a proper taste for it – and Scrabble, at which he excelled. *Ersatz*, *maieutic*, he spelled, arranging his tiles with glee. Once he'd won they got out their books, she, like a cat, alert for the slightest weakening that might allow her to insinuate her way onto his lap.

Two nights running she'd waited for him upstairs, the sleeping bags unzipped on the two narrow beds, as if something had been hatched out. Too cold to get properly undressed, she'd bundled herself up, tracing the parallel lines of light through the floorboards where he sat below, waiting, waiting, until the light became a wave that was the morning, bleary at the bare window.

Ardnamurchan Point to Cape Wrath. A resinous mist made it impossible to make out the full extent of the bay. Underfoot the sand was compact and easier going than on the dunes; she was careful to check her distance, as if any moment she might find herself up to her neck in water. She was the only vertical line out there, the wind racing through her like a needle. The slippery patches either side she knew to be bladder-wrack; the *plat, plat* of her feet telling her that the sea couldn't be far off; a flicker of light she took to be the output of a wave. To her left, a sprouting of rock she recognized, the spit of land they'd climbed in daylight. Her hands stopped with relief against the cold surface, and she allowed herself to glance back over her shoulder – no blip on the blurry line of the dunes, no soft footfall. She daren't turn away for more than a moment: the sea was unpredictable, sneaking up, rattling its cans. She secured a foothold and levered herself up onto the sloping surface, up and across, making for the highest spot.

And then she sat. Like Jonah in the Whale, the sea battering at the door. If she sat and waited he would be bound to come. It was human law. She prayed for it. This was how the story would go: he'd capitulate, worry she'd been gone too long – long enough to have learned her lesson – and out he'd come, that slouching walk of his, the lamps of his eyes far sharper than hers.

She could smell him in the arms of the tweed jacket, still damp from this morning's rain, when they'd sheltered in the ruined cottage. He'd been telling her about the clearances – bloody English! – scoffing at how little she knew, clambering over slabs of fallen stone to escape the downpour. She'd followed, crouching next to him in the lee of a wall, exhilarated by proximity, the lucky conspiracy of rain and stone that had brought them here. 'I could live in this place,' she'd said, her face burning as she plotted a life with only the two of them in it: he in his cottage, she in hers.

'You could write,' she'd said, after supper. 'We could come together for meals and walks.'

She'd gone too far. Something in the air had switched like a flight of starlings, a shoal of fish. He'd chucked back the drink from the bottom of his glass. 'I don't know who you think you are,' he said, grabbing the bottle. 'But you know fuck all.'

She kept very still.

'You just can't leave it; you're talking out of your arse.' He filled his glass again and took a swig, swilled the liquid round. It was late. The windows were black from the night outside and reflected the room so that she'd seen herself getting to her feet, heading for the porch. 'I'm going for a walk,' she'd said, hoping to jolt him out of it, stuffing her feet into his mother's boots, taking down his jacket.

She drew in her knees, hugged the rubber boots. If only she could strip herself of Englishness, like a shell. The sea slopped and gurgled below as it slithered off and then returned, slithered off then threw its scorn up in her face. She blinked, her eyes stung, blinded for a moment, panicked. Water everywhere, roiling, bitter-tasting, as if there was no option but to give in, drink, be drowned. Her skin was quick with sweat and cold. She backed off stiffly on her haunches, inch by inch, her breath lodged in her mouth. When she reached down with her leg, it was plunged into a pool that spilled over her boot and made a sock of ice around her foot. The dark was breaking over her head; she was hours from anywhere, from anyone. What a fool to imagine the sea would be on her side! *Sassenach*, it hissed, another word of his she had by heart.

She stumbled out across the strand and met a wall. Her radar was defunct. Where there were dunes before, now there appeared to be mountains, insurmountable. She skirted to the right. There was a fence where there was no fence before, a ditch. She folded herself into it, sinking down. Above, the earth and sky combined into a gyroscope of roaring. So this was where she'd built her house, on sand, on air, on a vacant lot.

Here's the story. She brought it on herself, and no-one will come to gather her up, to take her home, to tell her it is all right. Stupid cow. And only because the story is determined to come right does she get to her feet, snivelling, and stumble her way along the line of the fence. There is a smudge of light, and though she can't be sure she hasn't conjured it, for want of anything else, she intends to follow it. There's an old sailor who lives with his bedridden wife on the hill; a fierce woman in a cottage

near the bay, who was at Greenham Common. Never mind the humiliation - she'll throw herself on the mercy of the first stranger to take her in.

All this is jangling in her head when she hits tarmac, and, ahead of her, recognizes the incongruous blank of the carpark noticeboard. She surges forward, tripping over her feet and arrives at the porch door, bursting. The door shudders as she manhandles her way inside. She takes a moment to prise off the boots, unhand herself from the jacket, and stands breathless looking in.

'I got lost,' she gabbles, careful to strip any accusation from her voice.

He hasn't shifted. He raises the glass to sup, lets it drop, swallows. His eyes remain heavy, and they refuse to meet hers.

'It was *Moby Dick* out there,' she says, making a fool of herself to appease him. She kneels down, moving on her knees towards the fire, stretching the clumps of her fingers, raw with cold. Something flits across his face. But it is not relief, and it is definitely not love. She edits it out.