

THE CURIOSITY CABINET

The island crouches long and hilly on her horizon, like some mysterious hump-backed animal. Already she can smell it, the scent that is somewhere between land and sea and has something of both in it. The island is full of flowers. Ashore, Alys knows that honeysuckle will clutter the hedgerows like clotted cream, weaving a dense tapestry with marching lines of purple foxgloves. Earlier in the year there would have been clumps of thrift, a wild rock garden defining all the bays. Later, meadowsweet will fill the hedges and ditches. But now there will be pink roses and yellow irises. There will be nut-brown boats drawn up on the pale sand, and dress-suited oystercatchers patrolling among the seaweed. As the ferry comes to shore, she notices that the sea around Garve is still that shade of turquoise which she has seen nowhere else. The light is different here; the colours are brighter and more luminous. None of that has changed. It is the same as it always was.

The hotel is only a short walk from the ferry. They have sent a car to meet her, and to fetch her bags. She lets the Australian chauffeur – who, he tells her, is also the barman – load her suitcases into the boot, but then asks him to go on. She will walk the short distance, so that she can adjust to the island, breathe in clean air, be silent. She misses Ben, bouncing beside her, tugging at her jacket, talking. She trusts his father and stepmother to look after him. Well, she trusts his father, but still her imagination conjures horrors. She tries to put them from her mind, think about the pleasure of a week's freedom, but Ben's absence is a constant low-key worry.

Oddly, the hotel looks bigger than her memory of it: a grey stone building, facing the sea, with something of the castle keep about it, though not as tall. When they used to come to the island on holiday, when Alys was seven, and eight, and one last time when she was ten, it wasn't a hotel at all; it was called the Old Laird's House, but one of the new lairds lived there. He was a brown-sauce manufacturer from Warrington in search of peace and quiet. He was not a bad landlord, the islanders said. He did his best. You could walk in the grounds, but you had to ask permission in those days. As a child she had found gardens boring, preferring the haphazard fascination of the wilderness. She still prefers it, though recently she has also begun to understand her mother's interest in growing things, particularly flowers.

The sauce manufacturer is long gone and there have been a number of more or less satisfactory successors, but now the island is community owned and the house has been a hotel for some time. This is her first visit in twenty five years. They had always come back to the same rented cottage down by the seashore: her parents, her brother, herself, but now her parents are dead, and her brother Robert is living half way across the world. She booked the holiday on impulse a few weeks ago, because eight-year-old Ben would be spending a fortnight in Italy with his father and stepmother, and she couldn't bear the thought of the empty flat in an Edinburgh crammed with tourists. Then she found herself wondering if she had done the right thing. How

would she occupy her time on a small Hebridean island: a grown woman, with a wardrobe full of unsuitable shoes? So she made a special shopping trip for flat lace-ups, tough sandals, a waterproof jacket. Her friend Sophie came too and laughed at Alys who had never before set foot in any of those alarming shops dedicated to the Great Outdoors.

‘Oh God,’ she said, ‘look at you, Alys.’ Sophie is tall and skinny and goes hillwalking or even cycling from time to time. ‘Just look at you. I never thought I’d see you here among the gas burners and the hand warmers!’

The hotel smells of polish and pot pourri. Her bedroom is high up, looking out towards Scoull Bay. She unpacks, finds the bed to be firm and the linen to be crisp, showers in a gleaming bathroom, and then descends in search of gin. The residents’ lounge is the source of yet more pot pourri and polish but the windows are open. The sea is palest turquoise and there is the little lozenge of the ferry, zig-zagging back across a rock-strewn sound. The air outside smells of honeysuckle and roses and seaweed.

In the bar she drinks gin and tonic, eats salted peanuts, looks at the dinner menu (heavy on seafood), smiles at the barman, who carried her cases and drove them up from the ferry.

‘Just having a wee break?’ he asks. He uses the word ‘wee’ self-consciously.

‘That’s right. I used to come here on holiday when I was a kid. I always promised myself I’d come back some day.’

‘Good for you,’ he says absently. People keep telling him this but he can’t quite understand it. He has been here for a month and already he is bored. What do people do here? he wonders. How do they stand the rain?

The bar is quiet. The other residents are either changing or still out and about on the island, golfing, sailing, fishing, walking.

She can hear footsteps pattering across the wooden floor of another room. Somewhere a child is running about the hotel. Fleetingly she wishes it were Ben.

‘Excuse me?’ says the barman. ‘Do you want another?’

She holds out her glass, smiling at him, then turns again to look out of the window. Small clouds are strung out across the sky like sheep. Their shadows fall on the water below. Suddenly it feels like a homecoming.

Presently she takes her drink and finds the residents’ lounge again. It is still empty, so she moves about the room examining pictures. They are large oil paintings, grim death rather than still life: birds, their feathers tumbled and bloody, hunks of meat, overflowing platters of fruit and vegetables. There is the inevitable stag, on a heathery hill. There is a grimly handsome highlander, staring pensively into the distance. There are a few portraits of bald-headed, pot-bellied, self-satisfied old men, so dark as to be almost indistinguishable from each other.

And then she comes upon a display case of mahogany and glass. There are objects, neatly arranged on three shelves. But the casket is central. The casket has raised, heavily embroidered panels on a wooden base and little gilded feet. The scenes are biblical. A woman stands breast high amid the growing corn. She is Ruth. 'Whither thou goest I will go ... thy people shall be my people,' thinks Alys, surprised by her own knowledge, remembering the words from some long-ago reading, a school service perhaps. She hasn't been to church in years. There are birds and flowers too: long-necked swans and plump seagulls, honeysuckle, wild roses with their centres formed of tiny seed pearls, drooping foxgloves.

The embroidery has faded over time but only a little. The two front doors are open to reveal five drawers, two wide and three narrow, also embroidered with flowers and birds and beasts. There is a tall house in grey silk, with fragments of mica for windows.

She can still hear the child pattering about, giggling.

Other objects, presumably the contents of the cabinet, are spread out on the shelves above and below it. Here is a miniature shuttle, prettily inlaid with gold, and with a few discoloured threads still attached. Here is a needlelace collar, very fine and floral. Here is a tiny pincushion, a painted silk fan and a coral teether. On another shelf is a hand mirror, intricately decorated with semi-precious stones in the shape of flowers: forget-me-nots and pansies. Alongside these precious keepsakes, she is puzzled to see a little collection of pebbles and shells and swansdown. Finally there is a scrap of yellowed paper, with a few words of incomprehensible writing: a letter? A poem? Alys is enchanted by these things and suddenly possessed by the need to know more about them.

She wants to talk to somebody about the cabinet and its contents, but there is nobody in the room. I should have brought someone with me, she thinks. I should have got Sophie to come. She is distressed to find that she has a lump in her throat. The absence of her son is a dull ache inside her.

The barman passes the door with a couple of big bottles of wine and a bag of ice. 'Are you looking at our curiosity cabinet?' he says, grinning.

'Curiosity cabinet?'

'Well, that's what they call it here.'

'It must be very old.'

'Seventeen hundreds. Something like that,' he says vaguely. 'Maybe older. Sixteen something?' He shrugs. 'I wouldn't know.'

'Where are they from, all these things?'

'Not sure. You'd have to ask Mr Cameron, the manager. I think somebody lent them to the hotel. Must be worth a fortune.'

After dinner, she goes out and walks down towards the sea. Grey clouds veil the mainland. There has been a shower of rain, and all the fuchsia hedges are festooned with spiders' webs and hung with droplets of water. Alys finds herself glancing back at the spine of the island, behind the hotel. It was what they always did as children; looking west to see where the weather was coming from. The sky is clearing. The island reminds her of those magic painting books. The shop here used to sell them. You would dip your brush in water, and pale, clear colours would emerge from the page, as this green and blue landscape is emerging from the mist. She will never tire of seeing the transformation.

She heads for the little wooden jetty in Scoull Bay and walks along it, looking at the water. She has not been so alone for years; not since Ben was born. She still misses him, but the peace of this place tempers her homesickness. Its familiarity, after all this time, is comforting. She is relieved to discover that the old catwalk has not been replaced by anything bigger or more ostentatious. She used to come here, she and her brother Robert and a local boy. She tries to remember his name but she can't call it to mind. He fetched an old creel from home and showed them how to bait it, and they suspended it below the catwalk, trying to trap crabs. They caught several, much to their excitement: small, inedible creatures that they always threw back into the water.

The boy knew about the sea. He was a great hero to Alys. He could handle a boat, all by himself, and he told them stories of fierce conger eels that lurked in holes in the rocks and would bite your thumb off if they got half a chance. It had obsessed them for two summers: trapping crabs on Garve. And then the third summer, when she was ten, Alys invited a friend, a girl called Honey ('We had a golden retriever of that name,' her father said), and it wasn't the same. It was a rainy summer and Honey didn't like the island much. She didn't like the mud and the wind, and she certainly didn't want to go trapping crabs. 'Yeuch!' she said. 'Crabs!'

The island boy looked at her in astonished disgust, and Robert followed suit.

Nothing was the same. Robert, thirteen by then, got crabby himself, and went off with the island boy, telling Alys to get lost. They didn't want her. And then the boy's father took them out on a real fishing boat, but Honey wouldn't go because she was afraid of the water as well as the crabs, so Alys couldn't leave her. She and Honey fell out. They were barely on speaking terms by the time they got back to Edinburgh, and after that Alys's mother said she wanted to holiday somewhere 'where we can be sure of the weather'. They never went back to the island again.

'I must bring Ben here,' she thinks. 'He ought to get to know the place.'

Alys walks back up to the hotel, finally driven indoors by the midges, which are beginning to bite. Mr Cameron, balding and cheerful, is behind the bar now. The place is busier. Locals, fishermen mostly, lean on the counter, smoking and chatting and drinking beer. Several parties of yachtsmen and a few women are eating bar meals and taking up lots of space with their inevitable

yellow and red oilies. The room smells of smoke and chips. The locals look at her with polite but silent curiosity. The yachtsmen smile faintly. 'Hi. Oh, hi there,' they say. She finds a seat at the other end of the bar and Mr Cameron, recognising her as a resident, comes over to talk to her.

'Everyone comes back sooner or later,' he tells her comfortably.

'Do they?'

'Oh aye. It's that kind of place.'

'Twenty-five years ago. That's when I was last here. I was a little girl. It doesn't seem to have changed much.'

'Oh but it has. We're all masters of our own fate now, you know.'

The island had been the subject of a community buy-out some years previously. She had followed the story in the national press, intrigued.

'But that's a good thing, isn't it?' she asks.

'Oh, a very good thing – on the whole. But we're used to having a laird in these parts, you know. So many hundreds of years of tradition. It's very hard to let all that go. Still, it had to happen. It's all well and good when your laird takes his job seriously, when he realises that there's more than just a business or an investment at stake.'

She senses a 'but' and waits for him to continue.

He shrugs, unwilling to embark on local politics. 'Different times call for different solutions. We're in uncharted waters. We have to find a new way of handling our fragile places and people if they're to survive.'

She agrees with him. 'Well, they have as much right to life as any other endangered species.'

He chuckles, pours her another drink and goes to attend to a group of yachtsmen. 'You'd think so, wouldn't you?' he says, over his shoulder. 'In these environmentally conscious times.'

'Can you tell me anything about those things in the lounge?' she asks, when he comes back. 'I mean the embroidered box.'

'Ah, our treasures. They belong to Iain McNeill from Ardachy. He lent them to us so that visitors to the island could see them.' Mr Cameron looks around. 'He and his son Donal come in here most days. They could tell you more.'

'Donal's on the mainland,' says one of the men at the bar. 'Taken his dad to the hospital for a check-up. Should be back tomorrow morning.'

'So he donated them?' asks Alys.

'Lent them to us. Donal tells me the cabinet and its contents were all packed away in an old blanket box in his loft. We've been offered thousands for the things. We pass all the enquiries on to Iain but he always says no, not for sale. Nobody knows who they belonged to.'

'What about the locals? Doesn't anyone here have any ideas?'

‘Well, if they do know they aren’t saying to me. But then maybe they wouldn’t. After all, I’m an incomer like yourself, my dear. Only been here ten years. That’s no time at all on this island.’

That night, prompted by fresh air and gin, she falls asleep almost instantly. But she wakes up in the small hours, with a suffocating sense of loss, and wishes desperately that she was at home, that she could go into Ben’s room and plant a kiss on his cheek. She can almost smell the scent of his skin. She knows that he would wrinkle his nose and turn over with a sigh, clutching his toy dog closer to him.

When she falls asleep again, she dreams that Ben has gone missing. She is crying uncontrollably.

‘I want my son!’ she wails in her sleep. ‘I want my son. Where is he?’

It is a horrible dream, and she struggles to wake up from it. At last, she sits up in bed with her heart pounding. Fully awake, she switches on the light and listens. The hotel is quiet. She puts the light off again, gets out of bed and pads over to the window. She can hear the faint, sporadic swish of water on sand and the peep of wading birds, but nothing else. It strikes her how at home in Edinburgh you can always hear the muted background roar of traffic, day and night. The profound stillness here is almost unnerving, magnifying each sound. It never grows completely dark at this time of year. This is equally true in Edinburgh but the sky is always artificially light there, anyway. Here, she sees a dim twilight and a comforting smudge of brightness in the eastern sky. So she goes back to bed, and back to sleep, and her dreams are untroubled.

She spends the next morning following the narrow road to the north of the island, wearing her new shoes and her new waterproof jacket, until it makes her far too hot, in spite of its promise of ‘breathable fabric’, and she has to carry it tied round her waist. She has brought a picnic lunch supplied by the hotel kitchen, and around one o’clock she finds her way down a track through bracken and heather, to the windy western coast where a long beach of white sand is washed by powerful waves. You could come surfing here if you were so inclined. The tide is out and the sand is clean, apart from a few razor shells, white pebbles and shiny strands of seaweed. The beach is empty, but she sees a single set of footprints following the shoreline. Somebody has been here before her.

She finds a sheltered spot among rocks and makes herself comfortable while she eats ham sandwiches and fruit. She is finding it hard to get used to this sense of freedom. Nobody will mind if she is late. She can do as she pleases, stay here or move on. Nobody will tug at her hand and tell her to hurry up. The combination of wind and sunlight is dazzling. She leans back against the lichen-crusting rock and closes her eyes. Perhaps she falls asleep for a while because when she opens them again, she feels her cheeks burning. Through the wind, the sunlight is very strong. A

small boat is moving slowly across her field of vision and she can hear the remote put-put of its engine. She squints into the distance and can make out that the boat is carrying two or perhaps three people. The hotel advertises fishing trips and she supposes that this is what she is seeing. On board somebody raises an arm in salute and she waves back, watching the little vessel labour round the far headland.

Later on that day, after a nap, a long bath and a good dinner, she sits in the bar again with blistered feet and a sunburnt face, this time nursing a Laphroaig that tastes of peat and smells of smoke and honey. She remembers that her parents used to drink it whenever they were on the island and raises her glass in silent tribute to them. Wish you were here, she thinks.

Mrs Cameron comes and joins her, sitting down and easing pudgy little feet out of smart shoes.

‘Ah, that’s better,’ she says. ‘My corns can’t be doing with tight shoes any more. I’ve been shopping on the mainland. I think my feet appreciate island life more than I do.’

A small woman with permed grey hair, she is wearing a tight powder-blue summer dress and pearls.

‘You’ve got a touch of the sun!’ she says, looking at Alys’s scarlet cheeks.

‘I know. It was windy and I didn’t realise how bright the sun was.’

‘It can be very treacherous. You have to take care, you know. Did you not bring sun cream?’

‘I forgot.’

Actually Sophie reminded her, but she had thought it superfluous. ‘Sun cream? In the West of Scotland?’ she had said.

‘You’ll get some in the shop tomorrow.’ Mrs Cameron leans back and gazes at Alys with interest. ‘My husband tells me you were admiring our cabinet of curiosities.’

‘I think it’s wonderful.’

‘We’ve had it valued – with Iain’s permission of course. Late sixteen hundreds, they reckon. It’s worth a fortune; the contents, too. But Iain won’t sell.’

‘Maybe he doesn’t need the money.’

‘Oh, he could do with the money. And if he couldn’t, then his son certainly could.’

‘But he still won’t sell?’

‘He says it belongs on the island. And who’s to say that he isn’t right?’