

City girl

Seasons pass. I remember how you always said that: things pass, move on, one season giving way to the next, an endless cycle. Nothing lasts, not even the snow that lies thicker on the hills each day, slowly pressing down.

Winter will not last forever.

I wake enclosed by my own humid warmth. My legs wriggle straight until my toes encounter frozen wastelands. My nose nudges at cold. I listen to wind-rattled windows and the snap of branches against the roof. Outside, the turbine whirrs softly, an animal yowls.

The room is dark and I could stay here, burrowing down into the feathery, woollen warmth. I could sleep. Hibernate.

Temptation tugs and requires resisting. Capitulate now and the next giving in would be easier and so on and so forth into disaster. I've been there and it doesn't do to stop and wonder why I made the journey back.

I count down. *Three, two, one.* I slide out of bed, trying not to disturb the nest of grey blankets and once-bright covers. My breath mists and the cold sends a shockwave through my limbs, though you'd think they should be used to it by now. It is best not to linger, not to postpone the throwing off of layer upon layer of nightclothes and their replacement by the not dissimilar bulk I wear by day. Discarding one set of wool and cotton skins; adopting another. Top half first, then the bottom, minimising exposure.

My legs are stiff as a frozen corpse, needing to ease and adjust as I fumble round. I know the layout, the placement of objects in my small space. Light is not

needed, not really. Better to let the spinning turbine shore up power for more important uses.

I turn my phone on and the bleep pierces the background thrum of the wild. The single bar provides reassurance of a lifeline. In an emergency, there are people who would respond. People who remember. I have lived here long enough to gain acceptance of a kind, a grudging acknowledgement of steadfastness.

You said I'd never make it through a winter, not out here, not on my own. *City girl*, you said, but without your former softness. *Come back to the city*, you argued and cajoled.

You didn't think I could be serious, thought you could bring me round, just as you'd always done before. *Come back to the city*.

You left, thinking I would follow.

Memories flicker like flames. Activity helps to douse them.

I clear out the grate, yesterday's ashes gone cold. I light today's stove, watching for the flames to take, placing a pot over for water and another one for porridge. I survey the powdery remains of oats. I review the diminished pile of logs stacked by the fireside.

My toes toast as I sit and stir the porridge, which bubbles into life, splats and thickens. I throw in a fistful of currents and eat from the pot, and for a small while my body remembers warmth.

'But could you live here?' you said and I didn't pay you much heed, didn't think I needed to. You first brought me here in spring. Not here, exactly, but the nearest

town. ‘Town?’ I said incredulous, ‘you can’t call this a town!’ The back of beyond, more like.

You laughed, the way you always did. ‘Glorious weather!’ you declared, labelling the insipid yellow disc above as a summer’s day.

‘Bloody cold!’

‘It is not!’ You were dressed in T-shirt and shorts to prove it. ‘Southern softie!’ You had a soft, lilting voice. An accent that almost passed unnoticed down in London, which thickened and deepened as soon as we got here.

A holiday, that was all. Seeing the place you’d grown up in. Meeting family. I signed up for a holiday.

‘But could you live here?’ you said.

‘No way!’ my voice was teasing, mock-indignant, responding jokingly to what had to be a joke.

I drift a little in the heat of the fire, then snap alert. I count down. *Three, two, one.* I get up, get on.

I attempt some sort of wash, the flannel wetted and warmed by boiled water, rubbed over my face and behind my ears; reaching under clothes, beneath my arms, between legs.

I go on tour. The windows have acquired a layer of ice and I snap away the stalactites, testing their dagger points against my skin, rubbing away a port-hole in the centre of the glass.

Light creeps up imperceptibly, a slow transition from black to not so black, to outlines and shadows. Daylight is a grey and feeble affair, grudging in its appearance, delivering no warmth. The cloud hangs low. Fresh snow covers the hills and weighs

down the branches of the trees, smoothing over the flaws, leaving everything unsullied.

I prepare myself, pulling on yet more *XXL* clothes, turning myself to a Russian doll. At the door I hesitate. *Three, two, one.* The door opens in obedience. Outside, I remember what cold is.

I hold onto the door to steady myself, then push away, bent over like a crone, head-butting my way forward into the thick, living medium of air. The wind presses me back and we are locked into a pointless struggle, a point of deadlock. It gives. The wind drops and I pitch forward, slipping on the new snowfall, feeling tricked. Then the force is back, pushing back as hard as ever.

Triumph surges for making it across the yard and into the refuge of the shed. For a second, I feel marginally warmer. Wood is piled against the wall. I inhale, bringing back the memory of summer, blurry and indistinct, the heat of sun, the sweat of labour and the satisfying pain of blistered hands, an axe releasing the pungent, new-wood fragrance, and my mind unable, really, to comprehend the need for quite so much fuel. I review the remaining stack and calculate daily rations.

Despite the gloves, my hands are slow and fumbling as I fill my wicker basket. The routines of living are slow, heavy, hard. I think how I choose this. This is my choice.

‘I could get pregnant,’ I said, as if you didn’t understand the facts of life.

‘I know.’ Your smile shy, yet lascivious, your eyes avoiding mine, resting on my body, your hand smearing semen over my stomach then resting there, as if already protecting something, your face glowing with a kind of masculine pride.

We were lying together in your old bedroom, your boyhood single bed, the wind whistling outside, but the two of us kept warm by each other. Relaxing into the slow pace of this place, we'd allowed ourselves, both equally complicit, to get lifted up on a wave of love, carried away on the heat of lust. 'Shall we not bother?' you whispered at the point we should have reached for condoms, and I acquiesced, wanting no barriers between us, wanting not to pause and halt the flow. Careless, yet deliberately so. Knowing the risk. Wanting the consequence. Certain it would come good. Skirting round the practicalities and objections.

Wanting this. Here. Now. Wanting each other. Wanting more. To love and cherish another being.

I make the journey back and forth across the yard, leaving trails of footprints. The wood is cumbersome and heavy. Wood stacked inside, I head out again before I can decide otherwise, heading across the rough ground that in summer provides a profusion of vegetable and fruit. I enter my hovel of glass, with its artificial season, the LED lamps delivering false daylight and a low background warmth, the growing plants needing the nurture more than I do. I check and prod, I poke and water to ensure everything proceeds as it should, growth at its own pace, slow and plodding. I take enough for today's needs and there's a small satisfaction in the resistance then give of things drawn from the soil. The slide of a carrot, long and tapered, the chunkier tug of a misshapen swede and potatoes too, I pinch off leaves of perpetual spinach.

Back at the house there are more things to do. Today is washday. You were proud of your construction, the old beer barrel with windscreen wiper motor. 'Who needs German engineering?' you said, and I remember smiling, not wanting to

contradict your brimming enthusiasm. 'Low energy consumption.' Back then the numbers you recited didn't mean much. *20 watts*. You might as well have been talking rocket science. Now I can translate it to equivalents, alternative demands. An hour of light or heating for the greenhouse.

It wasn't really up to the job, not with three of us, your heavy jeans with their labourer's soiling, and the mess a baby makes. But just for me, it's more than big enough, and its simplicity is a boon and I know how to keep it going. You were the practical one, of course, I didn't have a clue. City girl, you'd tease, your eyes bright, your smile gentle.

But I learnt; I've learnt the things I had to.

The day passes much like any day, filled with the necessities of survival. There are thoughts to think and those to keep at bay. Time passes. Slowly, not with ease, but it does pass.

The winter night closes in. The clock on the radio shows it is barely half way through the afternoon, children will be at school, but still the night arrives, a slow switching off of the dim light.

With darkness, I close myself up inside. I take the kidney beans I've soaked earlier and set them to slowly boil. I hack at vegetables and set them to bubbling on the stove while the washing steams above.

The early nightfall allows for idleness. I pull the chair ever closer to the fire, letting one thigh slowly roast and I can picture the skin under the layers of padded trousers, leggings, tights, long socks, turning a rosy red. I flick the chair around, depriving one side of heat to let the other side acquire warmth, like meat on the spit.

I allow myself light and try to read, but my heart's not in it and though I turn the page of *War and Peace* in an illusion of progression, I then turn it back to reread the paragraphs I haven't yet grasped. I don't like to think how long I've been reading this, trapped somewhere in the middle, amidst wars and love and death. Trying to gain perspective. That's what you said I needed. A new way of seeing. Your arguments changing to suit you. My eyelids become heavy and I pinch myself awake; giving in now will steal sleep from me later.

I season the pot, herbs I dried last summer, in a pretence at caring how this will taste. I scatter the spinach and it floats a while, before being absorbed in. There are thick oatcakes, only slightly stale. And a little of the smoked fish left over from summer days.

The day has passed and I'm still here. Survival is not a trivial thing. I have won out once more.

The baby was born mid-winter. A London winter. At the time I thought it cold, living in a flat above a shop, feeding the gas meter fifty pence pieces that it sucked in as greedily as the baby sucked in milk. I thought life hard then, struggling up and down steep stairs, baby in one arm, cumbersome pram bouncing down the steps behind me.

But the difficulties didn't matter. None of it mattered. Not the out-of-workness or the grot and grunge of the flat, not even the crying at night and broken sleep, the cracked nipples and the soreness down below. Amidst all this, a perfect being. A soft-silk of black-sheened hair. Satin cheeks, tinted rose. Curious eyes and curling lashes; coiled toes, grasping fingers.

We called him Jarlath, Jarl for short. A Gaelic name, you said, meaning a leader or prince. I gazed at the small snuffle of a baby nose in which it was hard to

imagine the profile of leadership. Our tiny prince. And I think of the two of us smiling, those moments when we were so stupidly happy, so insanely proud, so pleased with ourselves.

The creators of perfection, how could we not be perfect too?

I think I hear something. A low whimper. A cry that could almost be human.

The howl of the wind plays tricks. It mingles with the crack of the fire and the creaks of the cottage, with the rattles of the window and the general chicanery of the mind. Living remotely does not provide quiet.

It's there again, a noise beyond the usual background and I am up and heading to the door, dragging myself away, pulling against the steep gradient – fire in the grate, ice at the door and all the temperatures in between. Curiosity is still alive.

I listen, ear to the door: the lament of the wind; an otherworldly cry that shifts and changes; the low whine and scratch that surely must be a trick.

My hand reaches for the doorknob, gripping the wood tight, thinking of the rapid outflow of warmth and the stealing inwards in its place of bitter cold. Ridiculous to even think of opening the door.

But I can't not.

The air rushes at me, victorious; playful in victory, it picks my hair up and swipes it across my eyes. There is nothing here. Nothing. Nothing but black. A black shape, curled up on the step outside, a shivering quiver of matted, soaked through fur. I act without thought. The shape is picked up, transferred from one side of the threshold to the other before I know it, and the door pushed back against the outdoors. The shape drips and shivers and shakes, struggling to stay on four legs, fur plastered against its body, covering the features of the face that must be there.

‘What are you doing here?’ My voice sounds strange, spoken out loud. I do not often speak, not through the long hours, the months and years of winter.

I crouch down; my hand discovers a hard skull and pliant ear. I see the flash of pink tongue and feel the rough, wet warmth against my hand.

‘What are you doing here?’ I ask again, as if expecting an answer. The legs, all four of them, tremble and collapse and the puppy curls in on itself.

The phone call came amidst a noisy meal. We were celebrating my birthday. I heard your voice rising above the clatter of friends and family, not the words, but the excitement, the high that was still plastered on your face when you came back from the hallway. ‘I’ve a surprise,’ you said, so certain your news was good.

I grinned back, confident I would share your pleasure.

‘There’s a house,’ you said. ‘We could get a house.’

‘We can’t afford a house,’ I said.

‘We can. We could. There’d be work too.’

‘But how? Where?’

That noisy gathering turned silent. You looked like a magician about to pull stream upon colourful stream of ribbon out of a hat.

‘Back home,’ you said.

‘This is home,’ I said, my smile fading, my optimism ebbing, as comprehension slowly formed.

‘Not for me it isn’t.’ Suddenly you were sombre too, and all around us were *my* friends, *my* family, not understanding and still thinking the news was good.

‘What house? Where?’ Someone asked.

You talked then, in that soft easy way you have. Persuasive. A friend of your mother's. A good friend. Her neighbour had passed away and the family – long since moved elsewhere – were looking to sell and she was asking round, avoiding estate agents and their fees. Keeping things local.

You mentioned a sum of money and people stared in disbelief, saying how that wouldn't buy you a broom-cupboard in London. You talked about possibilities for work, how things had picked up in the years you'd been gone, the town was undergoing an expansion. Tourist trade and so on. You talked about the drama of the landscape, the mountains, lochs and sea. 'You loved it, didn't you?' you said, remembering the holiday selectively. You said how it would be so much better for the baby. Somewhere safe to raise a child. Somewhere he could grow up strong and free. *Bairn* was the word you used, though you hadn't earlier, slowly returning to roots you'd never told me were so strong.

Inside I was protesting. *No, no way, don't ask me, I can't do this. This wasn't part of the deal.* While friends and family were picking up your mood and telling me I should go for it, that it was a golden, a once in a lifetime opportunity, all of them willing to discard me, to set me adrift in the Northern Highlands.

The black shape is wrapped up, swaddled in the oldest of my ancient towels with only a nose peaking out and aimed directly at the fire. The fur above the eyes dries, the strands separating and fluffing up. The eyes are closed, the yellow-white crust of sleep in the corners. The whiskers are smudged white, the last of the long-life milk, that carton kept for an emergency. This is an emergency then, a half-starved, frozen-through puppy. The towel moves, in and out, the rhythm of lungs, of life, of not-dead.

A shiver passes through the small body, starting at the tail and ending in a snort of the nose, as the puppy settles down into the bliss of warmth.

I watch the flicker of flames, feet slow-roasting alongside this living thing. I have no use for a puppy. Never was a dog person. Never any sort of animal person. *City-girl*, you used to say, your smile lopsided and wry. *My girl from the city*.

I remember Christmas lights on Oxford Street, the press and throng of crowds, the thrill of shops, the warmth and press of bars, nightclubs. I remember another life.

City girl. I can't hardly remember her.

We moved here in spring, and it felt like winter anywhere else. The first week it rained. Not the on-off rain of London, not a nuisance of April showers. A slow, continual plod, relentless, never letting up, not allowing for a break. On, on, on. Everything damp. Grey. Cold. And accompanied by wind, blowing the rain into every crevice, making sure there was no avoiding it.

The house was cold, unkempt. The walls were wallpapered brown and beige. The carpets were worn and beige. The bathroom tiles were beige.

'We can fix it up,' you said.

The windows rattled and rain accumulated in puddles on the sill. The backdoor refused to shut. The taps dripped and the boiler was temperamental with only you able to coax it into life.

'We'll fix it all,' you promised, your promises like the hoped for sun, tantalising, elusive.

The fire ebbs. I listen to the noises of the winter night. Wind in the chimney. The clatter of rain thrown against the windows like handfuls of gravel. The creaking

settlement of the timbers of the cottage. The noises I am used to combine with the regular in-out wheezing of puppy breath.

I stir. The dog stirs too, as if keeping one ear alert for my movement. Curiosity perhaps. Or the fear of abandonment for a second time. The puppy has a collar fastened securely on. There is a phone number and a name. I have no use for a name, or for phone numbers either.

It is time for bed. Time for the wrench away from the diminishing warmth and fizzing orange light. Time for the squeezing out of dregs of paste from the tube and the flash of a toothbrush. For the edge of a flannel dipped into water and run over my face, avoiding my reflection in the mirror. For the quick and furtive undressing and redressing.

The bed is cold at first, the cotton frozen by the hours of day, retaining no memory of warmth. I hug myself tight and my legs shuffle back and forth as best they are able, generators of a heat that the feathers and wool will trap. The day has drained me of energy, as if I've been scaling mountains. We used to do that once, you and I, that summer when Jarl had turned two, and my heart had softened and settled and the landscape had reached in, a slow, patient process of conversion. The mountain equipment shop sold baby backpacks, keeping a child strapped tightly tied to a parent's back. You didn't see the need – tourist toys for city folk – hoisting him high, high on your shoulders, leaving Jarl burbling with excitement and me tight with fear.

‘What if you fall?’

‘I never fall.’

‘But what if you do?’

‘It'll be fine.’ You grinned with confidence and I tried to feel it too, convincing myself that you were right, that we were impervious to harm.

Slowly I warm a little and my limbs relax. Slowly I feel the ache of my back and the disquiet in my mind and I know that despite my exhaustion sleep will not come easily and the night hours will pass impossibly slowly.

It is darker than most people know. I remember coming here, seeing how night extinguished everything, drowning the world in thick black ink when I was used to shadows.

Amidst the familiar night noises is something new, the scratch over floorboards. I feel something tugging at the covers and a weight landing on the bed beside me and there is a damp snuffling presence beside me on the pillow. I push the dog away, but only gently and she settles lower down into the curve of my back. I've never been an animal person.

Jarl longed for a dog. 'Please, Mum, please.' Over and over. His brown eyes pleading, his black hair flopping into his eyes, the look that would melt a stone. 'Maybe, when you're older,' I'd say. 'When you're old enough to look after it properly.' I had enough to do with half a dozen part-time jobs; it was hard enough to make ends meet without dog food and vet bills.

'But I want one now.' And I'd get annoyed at the repetition, the refusal to accept that *no* meant *no*. A stubborn streak. *Like his father*, I'd say. And you'd smile and you'd repeat to him that line. *Later. When you're older*. You talked about responsibility and learning to be patient. Those virtues you never had.

Regret pulls tight, a cord round my neck restricting breathing. A replay, played over too many times. Regret for every time we denied him anything, for the things we would have let him have, if only we had known.

Why didn't we let him have a dog?

I turn and my arm drifts round the shape beside me, limbs remembering other beds, other living presences beside me. You. Jarl. My body remembering the intimacy of sleeping beside another being, the sharing of warmth, the trusting of a sleeping self to another. And the old ache shifts and disperses and I feel myself drifting down.

That first winter here, I thought I'd never get through. We argued you and me, on and on, stopping only when Jarl's cries mingled with ours. *I can't do this*. It was too hard, too cold. The snow lasted for three months. It compacted down and froze solid as rock. Fresh layers accumulated on top. We couldn't get the house warm, couldn't afford the oil that burned and made barely a difference to the temperature. Strapped in his pushchair, Jarl turned blue after five minutes outside. I knew no one. You had work, keeping you busy all day. When you got home, you were blue too.

City girl, suffering winter blues.

It'll pass, you said. Just wait and see. Winter will pass. Just wait for spring.

I wake to a moment's disconnect, the awareness of something different. The quality of air, the give to the bed.

In the days following, I would wake and in those first seconds of returning to myself, my mind would have blotted out events, allowing me a few seconds of an alternative reality, before I remembered.

But today's realisation is not unwanted, not exactly. I feel some renewal of energy and purpose now it is not just myself who requires looking after. Stove lit, I peer out into the darkness that is pierced by the pale light of a lingering moon, reflecting off the snow. The night has been clear, leaving a glitter of frost. The wind has dropped and somehow the outdoors seems less threatening.

Jarl grew month by month, year by year. We measured height against a door post and weight on the scales and progress with numbers and letters. We were so eager, you and I, to see the developments, wishing childhood away rather than sorrowing for its passing.

You wanted to him to grow strong and independent. Talked of the things you had done as a child, never thought twice about, the staying outdoors dawn to dusk and beyond, your parents never stopping to wonder and worry where you were. Giving you licence. Night-time fishing escapades. Hunting, swimming. Feats of climbing. The woods. The hills. The sea.

‘He’s just a child,’ I’d say.

‘And kids are more resilient than you’d think,’ you replied.

You had a stubborn streak, I knew the full extent of it by now. *City girl*, your voice was gently mocking. This was your territory; you should be the one to set the rules. To define the boundaries, and the lack of them.

You let him run free.

I bought him a mobile phone, though the coverage was patchy.

You accompanied him on boy’s own adventure trips and as long as he was with you I knew the two of you would remain free from harm.

We sent him for swimming lessons at the local school, imagining that would help, and you talked to him about the rules for staying safe.

It wasn’t as if you didn’t know the risks. You joined the coast guard, said it was only right, looking out for others, they needed young and strong recruits. You built up stores of stories and I’d hear them told and retold when friends and family from the city came to visit. The call outs, the rescues and the drownings. I never liked

the nonchalant way you spoke, talking up the drama, hyping your own part in the action.

I let the puppy out into the yard a while and then leave newspaper in the corners of the room. I pile on layers of clothing and pull on my heavy boots. I hear the puppy barking at the door as I close it, but it's no good; she'd just slow me down. That's what I tell myself.

I head off along the track, the four miles trudge into the village. On a good day in summer, it takes an hour, give or take. But with the ground covered in a fresh layer of snow and the ice beneath, I take it slowly, step by step. I abandoned watches years ago, calendars too. I have the seasons and the progression of the sun. And the radio sets me straight, allows me to realign, when I choose.

I settle into the state of walking, one leg forward, then the next, mind and body occupied by the task of not slipping, but still thoughts press in, press tight, like leeches, refusing to let me be.

You told me I'd never last a winter out here. You didn't believe me when I said I couldn't return, not to the city. Not then.

I couldn't stay in the house – our house – of course, didn't want to, couldn't have afforded to anyhow. The croft was half a ruin when I took it over, getting the building and the land for a song. You'd been right about the upturn in tourist trade, offering work, pushing house prices higher. My half of the equity proved enough, for the half-life – the quarter-life – I choose to lead.

City girl, learning to make do.

Despite the precautions of fleecy layers, of thick socks and gloves, the cold seeps in and my toes are numb and my fingers unyielding by the time I reach civilisation.

Civilisation! I'd hardly have called it that, all those years ago. A scattering of houses with basic services. It is still ten miles from town. The town I visit only when absolutely necessary.

There is a post office and shop here and mostly that's enough.

We know each other, the woman serving in the shop and I. For three years now I have come here buying supplies. Milk when I can afford the luxury. Tea. Packets of dried beans. Cooking oil. Oats. Flour. Soap. The things I can't grow myself, nor acquire from bartering fish. We acknowledge each other only with a nod, a meeting of eyes, not even a perfunctory back and forth exchange of *how are you?* A respecting of each other's space within a mutual wariness. Weeks, perhaps months have gone since I have been here.

I pick up long-life milk. Oats. Most likely amongst the shelves there will be dog food, but instead I buy a couple of tins of mince, wondering if she'll notice I've never bought that before, knowing she won't comment. No reason to think she'll care. I don't bother with a basket, letting things accumulate in my clumsy hands. I stop before the board of notices, my eyes traversing it idly, as if I really might be interested in the TV someone has up for sale, or the reminder that there's a doctor's surgery once a week. I pick out the new notice almost immediately, the paper white and crisp, the letters black and bold.

Have you seen Sally? I read. Followed by the description of a black Labrador puppy. Bought for Christmas. Taken out for a New Year's walk by visitors to the area, who were staying with family, not understanding the way the weather can close in, obliterating visibility, and the way a dog, especially a young one, might get lost.

There is a phone number to call with an unknown dialling code. The alternative of a local address and number, from where news can be passed on.

I go up to the till.

The transaction is conducted in near silence, just the back and forth of *thank-yous* as items and money are passed, me to her, her to me. Her face displays no curiosity. I am not from here. Perhaps she does not trust that I will stay, or does not care, or is simply awkward. People are clumsy around grief.

‘Just a moment,’ she says, as I’m on the point of leaving. She goes behind the glass barrier of the Post Office counter.

Her hands shuffle through piles. She pauses. Inspects. Turning the card forwards and back, looking up at me and down. Then brings it over. ‘Yours,’ she says.

I say, ‘thank you,’ taking it and leaving without stopping to read. I know what it is without looking: a glossy city image, iconic buildings against a summer sky, with a message on the back, the cryptic words you expect me to make sense of. ‘City girl,’ it might say. Or, ‘a smile.’ ‘A word.’ ‘Come back.’ And I don’t know which is worse. The continuance of hope, or the alternative. We divided on this point you and me. You, opting for hope, me for its absence. But the absence of hope is not despair, just as the absence of cold is not warmth. It is a quiet nothing.

Jarl grew tall and straight, like a reed, his skin bronzed all summer which you offered as proof of visitations by the sun, though my complexion never caught it. The two of you camped out on the nearby hills and you came back looking like you’d caught the pox, both with faces swollen by angry midge-bites. He laughed it off in your presence, whined and cried when it was just me.

You taught him to fish, bringing back great baskets of slippery, silvery mackerel, still flapping in a reflex of life. I never liked fish, not really. 'You'll like these,' you said. 'I'll convert you.' You assured me they were dead.

'Don't expect me to deal with them,' I said that first time, the writhing mass of them filling the sink, glistening under clear, cold water.

'I won't,' you said. And true to your word, you beheaded, definned and tailed, gutted, cleaned and filleted them, all the time teaching Jarl what to do. You dipped the fillets in oatmeal and salt and fried them lightly and we feasted, and I tried not to think how we'd be eating nothing else for weeks.

In bed when you touched me, your fingers smelt of the sea.

The puppy greets me in a frenzy of barks and tail wagging. All that bounding optimism makes my heart lurch for the things I don't want to remember. 'Down!' I say. 'Down!' I think of earlier at the shop and what I didn't say.

The puppy ignores me and keeps on jumping, and I remember how the mite is half-starved. I take a chipped bowl from the cupboard and fill it with a third of a tin of meat, knowing I have no idea how much I should feed a puppy, but surely this is better than the oats soaked in milk I gave her yesterday. I don't need meat, but I imagine a puppy might. The food is wolfed down in messy gobbles. I hold back from giving her more, though her eyes are wide with hope and hunger. I pour a white stream of milk. The sound of lapping is soothing and I sit and watch, feeling satisfied somehow, at this small act of care.

The to and fro to the shop has expended my energy and occupied the hours. The wind is low today and the turbine spins in a desultory way and though the batteries should be charged, I am careful of drawing on reserves. I crawl back to bed,

and doze and the puppy dozes beside me and there is a kind of comfort. Amidst the pain there are small comforts and moments when loss is bearable.

A summer's day and Jarl headed off fishing. You were busy on a job and he said he was meeting up with a mate, but later we found he hadn't and we'd never know why not.

My last memory: him heading out, not a backwards look, his hand raised in the air, waving away my cloying, nannying concerns. Nothing but his fishing gear and a bottle of water. He'd eat slivers of his catch raw, open air sushi. 'He'll be fine,' you said, proud of your boy, of his independence.

He was seen leaving town. And then a gap. He must have headed up the coast, clambering over the cliffs and dropping down into the small bays and their outcrops of rocks from where with his long pole he could fish. The way he'd done so many times before. No one remembered seeing a ten-year-old, dark-haired boy, picking his way along the coast, avoiding the walkers' paths, taking the fisherman's route.

The dog regains her puppyish sense of herself, her bounding energy and inquisitive nose, her appetite for food, for ear-pulling, stroking, cuddles and face licking. Freed from her ordeal, she no longer dwells on it.

I can't keep her cooped up indoors.

I take her for walks, brief forays into the cold, and the weather has eased a little, a temporary lull, which might fool anyone less knowing of the place to a sense the worst is over and spring might be on its way. The bulk of mountains looms above us, white glistening peaks against dusky blue and the trees forming black profiles.

And beneath is the sound of the sea, its never-ending motion.

We don't venture far. She runs ten times the distance that I walk, brief skirmishes left and right, ahead, behind, disappearing behind rocks, or the coverage of trees, but always coming back, as if I form the centre of her universe. She knows a meal ticket when she sees one. Her eyes are so bright, so full of doggy optimism that it hurts to look into them.

No one saw.

No one saw how he must have slipped, his mountain-goat feet losing their balance, slipping over wet rock.

'I can't keep you,' I tell the dog, thinking it important to be honest, knowing she does not understand. I tried talking to Jarl, the way everyone told me to, knowing in my deepest heart it made not the slightest difference.

Maybe no one will come, I think, contradicting what I say. Maybe trudging the four miles is too long and Christmas is gone and the child has moved on, or has been bought a new dog.

I wait.

A day passes and then another. I allow myself to plan how I might manage with a dog, how the patterns of my day might need to shift and adjust. How I might balance the extra expense with small savings.

I start to think of what might be possible. Hope, or something akin to it, infiltrates through. I remember what it is to plan ahead rather than staying in the moment and reliving the past. 'You can't stay,' I keep saying, not at all sure I mean it.

Everyone said afterwards it was a fluke, a kind of miracle.

He was seen. Someone on a passing boat glimpsed the flash of blue jacket in the water and headed in towards the cove, hauling out a boy and heading towards the harbour.

News passes quickly in these parts when it needs to. A call came from the boat to the coast-guards who arranged priority berthing and an ambulance to be waiting. You'd dropped by the operations room that day, just for a mug of tea and gossip and you heard the call. You rang me. 'It's probably nothing,' you said. A sixth sense telling you, that was not be the case. 'A boy. A blue jacket.'

My heartbeat came to a painful stop.

We waited side by side on the pier and you held my hand, crushing it within your own, forgetting your own strength, the way you did sometimes in bed, and I didn't tell you to stop the way I would have normally, a foolish superstition setting up, if I bear this tiny pain uncomplainingly, then everything will be alright.

Already I knew, it wasn't anywhere near enough as sacrifice.

On the third day, a man appears. Out in the yard, I see him approaching from afar, just a shadow on the horizon before he turns a corner and disappears.

People do come this way. Even in the depths and mists of winter, people still walk for recreation, strange though that thought has become. Recreation; leisure; enjoyment: the concepts seem distant, the idea that people willingly expose themselves to the wilds and expend energy for no real purpose.

But I know this man is not one of those. I don't recognise him precisely as he comes nearer, but I see he is of these parts.

'Is it you?' he asks as he gets to within hearing distance. 'Are you the one who might have found the puppy?' He is carrying a leather leash.

For a moment I am poised to deny it. The puppy, who I have not given a name, will be curled up inside, snoring in front of the fire, her fur steaming as she dries out from this morning's walk.

I don't say anything, hovering between alternative possibilities.

'Only the woman from the shop, she said you lived out here. Said you might know something. So I thought I'd come and check it out. Only my nephew was heartbroken.'

I think of the nephew and I want to ask his age. But I don't. Already I've imagined him Jarl's age, the age at which he so desperately wanted a dog and it's the shocking clarity of this image that drives me to say, 'A puppy you said? Yes, there's a puppy.'

He nods. Communication reduced to the essentials.

I gesture to the house and then turn and walk towards it, leaving him to follow.

The puppy comes to the door as I enter, still damp, her tail wagging frantically left to right, in anticipation of some treat: a walk, food, company, a scratch behind the ears. I look at the man. He nods again. I tell him how I came to find her, being as certain as I can about the days. 'Six days ago.'

I see him calculate. 'That figures. Eight days ago we lost her. She must have been missing for two. Half drowned you say?'

I flinch.

'We can't live here.' Perverse that you be the one to decide it. Even more perverse for me to protest, 'Where else can we go?'

'Back to the city. London perhaps. Edinburgh. Somewhere with proper hospitals and doctors.'

‘To do what?’ The doctors had already done the best they could and it wasn’t anywhere near enough.

‘There must be something. Therapy. Drugs. There are new treatments all the time.’

Our boy drowned, but he didn’t die, drowning into himself, his self submerging until nothing remained, only a fierce tenacity for life, baby fists clutching on with surprising strength.

The sea took our dark-haired imp, leaving nothing but wreckage.

‘He’s still in there,’ you insisted.

This was our final disagreement, the ultimate failure of understanding, rendering previous disputes as petty. I looked into the unblinking eyes of our son and I saw nothing. No understanding. Less than an animal intelligence. And I hated you for not seeing it too.

‘I’ll look after him,’ I said. ‘I’ll feed him by hand and change his nappies; I’ll wash him and move him so he doesn’t develop sores. But only here. Here where we knew him. Not in the city.’

‘Not too many puppies round here,’ I say, not challenging the man’s claim. ‘You’ll be wanting to take her back with you then.’

‘Aye.’ His expression is inscrutable and he doesn’t ask whether I’ll feel loss or the relieving of a burden. The matter is simple. He will take back what was never mine. ‘I’ll take her now. If it suits.’ The latter is a formality, I can hardly demand he return later.

I nod.

I watch as he catches her by the scruff of her neck, attaching the leash to the collar I never did remove, and she wriggles, squirms and yelps, though his manner is kind enough.

‘I’ll be off then.’

I don’t prolong this, don’t offer tea or coffee, those city habits long forgotten.

‘Best be going before the weather closes in,’ he adds, as if I was seeking to delay him. ‘And thanks. For looking after her.’

I nod again, not wanting to speak in case my voice betrays emotion. I think of her life in the city and how perhaps she might have had a better life here, but I can’t allow myself to dwell on it. I stroke her silky ears one last time and feel the rough moisture of her tongue. I watch as she strains on the leash, looking behind, wondering what is happening, and I think of the last time I saw Jarl, his head twisted, eyes pointing in my direction.

They’re gone. I look up into the unending grey of the sky, at the closing in of a winter night once again.

Inside I stroke the glassy surface of the card I picked up before. I turn it to read the words. *City girl, come back.*

But I can’t.

Seasons pass, they shift and change. But I cannot.