

### **Route 1: The First Step**

**Terrain:** Boardwalk paths

**Time:** 1 hr 30 mins

**Difficulty:** Easy

Beginning from the Rorymuir Tea Rooms, where you can power up with one of Rosemary's famous lemon drizzle slices, this is a predominantly flat route that relies on canal paths and fenced walkways, keeping you at arm's length from the local sheep and cows. Turns are noted well in advance, and there is little opportunity to get lost, or even to get caught short (amenities can be found on the way). A brief exploration of a fascinating peat bog area, this route contains the chance to get your boots muddy and to climb the very casual incline to the viewing tower, from which you may look out into the rest of the wilds. Ideal for those who've missed nature and want to see it again, but may not be inclined to go further.

### **Route 2: Once-returned**

**Terrain:** Well signposted paths, mostly maintained.

**Time:** 2 hrs

**Difficulty:** Easy, with intermediate diversions.

A truly beautiful trail that offers a few challenges, just to get the heart going. Join the orange-marked path from behind Larker's Farm and follow this as far as the stone bridge by the old forge. You will barely notice the gradual incline up through the wind farm, though you will likely feel the wind pick up as you reach the flat top. Where the path parts, take either choice; this split forms a loop around which you will return, no matter which way you go. It's nice to be out here, isn't it, with the sounds and sights and smells of the outside world? Beware of lambs in spring, but if you do come across one, lean close in and sniff the sweet stink of youth on its burgeoning fuzz. It's a smell you knew well, once. Sit with that feeling as you round the loop and find your way back to the path you followed before. It's just a straight walk home from there.

### **Route 3: Stream-enterer**

**Terrain:** Requires good hillwalking boots, poles and a good supply of Kendal Mint Cake

**Time:** 4-5 hrs

**Difficulty:** Intermediate

A thoroughly enjoyable walk that takes a climb up and over a few moderate hills before meeting an attractive body of water, rounding out with a stiff descent into the Calltanner Valley. Don't be put off by the relatively steep ascent on the forest tracks behind the starting point of the Three Queens Inn; though this route requires a little fortitude you will soon find yourself right at home. Follow clear markers and keep yourself steady as you hit the boggy area between the two peaks. As you round Loch Aber you will be entranced by the soft ripples across the water, the stormy blue far beneath the silken-soft top. You will stop and stoop and dip your index finger in; it will pass through and come back with barely a movement of the surface. So simple to go. It would be like stepping through a mirror, and down there, it would be silent, the storm's warmth contained and stilled, wrapped around you like wool. You could stay down there for as long as you wished, for time would not notice you gone, and there you could convalesce. You wonder how many are down there recovering now, quiet together, breathing the same water as if it were delicious, reviving, life-giving air.

### **Route 4: Non-Returning**

**Terrain:** All types

**Time:** 8 hours +

**Difficulty:** Not for the faint-hearted

Begin before sunlight, and only in summer, from wherever you can find that feels right. Head torches may be required for the first portion of the trail. A map will be required as you find your way onto the Peaks Ridge, though your compass will not work, due to the ferromagnetic materials in the rock. The route bears right and steeply upwards before reaching the bealach, requiring some scrambling or even climbing. At the apex of Ben Rangor you will take a brief moment to survey the glorious landscape in front of you. You've

missed it, somehow; the gentle hum of the air, the comforting vibrations of the soil, the way the ferns at your feet lie against each other to make a quilt. Is this how you remember it, or is it more alive than ever? You wonder whether you have been asleep to this, or whether it has changed around you, terraforming into something that you've needed all along. You can hear the seeds popping, the spores dropping, the leaves catching drops from the soft sheet of rain just sweeping over to envelop you and the mountain on which you now stand.

### **Route 5: The Achievement**

**Terrain:** Mostly rocky and rough, often icy, with brief plains of sheer idyll and a divine summit

**Time:** Six weeks minimum

**Difficulty:** Unfathomable

You'll set off from home and follow the pull north. Go alone, though the other guides may recommend companionship. You will trek easily across undulating land; this is not where the difficulty lies. You must hold your nerve through the pockets of bleak indifference, through the valleys and the bogs. The ascent will feel indescribably long, and yet soon you'll be there, straddling the high peak, ecstatic. The haar will come in, though you are miles from the sea, and you won't find this at all unsettling. It will make sense; will, in fact, be all you've ever wanted. You will stand as the clouds of mist baptise you, you will breathe in the cold, wet air, you will send yourself down into the granite and it back up into you. You remove your boots. The rock is barren, yet vines break painlessly through the soft meat of your feet, tickle your muscles as they wind around your bones, give you a strength you have never had before. You take off your clothes and moss blooms on your skin. Your blood is clear water. You are rooted. You are renewed. This is where you belong.

Daphne lives on the top floor, and won't come down without an arm to help her. This is a compromise they've come to over the last few years. She used to meet Sam downstairs, saying it was just common sense; silly to have everyone waiting in the bus when she had two working legs and a will of steel. But she'd say this while leaning hard on the wall, her breath laboured, and not just from the fifty fags that she still insisted on smoking every day, library trips punctuated by cigarette breaks between bites of Garibaldi. *Some things you can change, given half the chance*, she would say by way of explanation, *but some things you can't*. Yet today Sam feels overwhelmingly grateful for Daphne's stubbornness, her steadfast refusal to move even one inch from her routine; it is the life raft on which her nonagenarian friend has made it through the last nine months.

Sam chaps the door, which is open a smidge and probably has been since early morning - as if she might, this one time out of hundreds, arrive at the crack of dawn. She calls in as usual - *It's me, Daphne, Sam with the library van* - though it's a formality that no longer fits, required by the volunteer guidelines but completely unnecessary, just like the laminated name tag in her pocket. Sam has heard all of Daphne's stories, has helped her into the clothes she always approaches as if they are the belongings of a total stranger. She has held Daphne's hand through a coughing fit and then gently rinsed her old friend's hanky, saying nothing about the red stain that they both saw on it. In return, Daphne's sharp questions have probed every corner of Sam's life - *is it a man friend you live with? Are you a boy or a girl? Is your hair like that because you're on tablets?* - so much so that identifying herself now seem ludicrous, and yet it's a habit she can't shake. Especially today, when she needs everything to be normal, routine; when she needs to find her stubborn old mule behind this door with the same caustic personality she's come to love.

But there is something different. The air is all stale smoke today, not cut with the cloying floral perfume that Daphne would usually surround herself with. Today it's just the cigarettes and the frying spices of a neighbour's lunch: cinnamon and bay. The window is open, something that Daphne will not stand for; the noise of the street below annoys her too much. A step further in;

off the hallway, an open kitchen door. A pack of straight razors on the stained seventies countertop. Sam's stomach lifts, a precursor to panic, and she calls out Daphne's name again. There is a moment of silence.

*In here, my love.*

She is not in her chair, by the now-vintage cassette player which Sam has offered to replace several times. The library has run out of new books on tape, but Daphne keeps taking out the ones she has listened to two, three, maybe four times before. Sam stares at the abandoned cigarette still smoking in the ashtray and her stomach lifts again, creating a space into which she is worried the whole situation might fall. There has been a shift in the way of things, and such shifts are rarely good news with the elderly. She hears a gentle cough and finds herself in the hallway, standing by bedroom door. She has never seen inside this room; even when half dressed, Daphne meets her in her sitting room chair, demanding help with her tights or the fastening of her skirt. Sam knocks, barely wanting her knuckle to meet the wood.

*Come in, love. You can come in.*

It has been nine months. Sam has found so many of them smaller, quieter than they had been before all this began. The lack of company, the fear, the silence. Every day she takes them from their perches and finds them timid, but still there. But she pushes the door and finds, on the bed, a person refreshed. Someone brand new, and still timid, but differently so - a bird on the edge of a nest, learning to trust its new wings. This new person smiles, and runs a deeply veined hand over a short back and sides. There is a moment of silence.

*I used to do my husband's, says the warm, smoky voice, no barbs nor spikes about it.*

*You're looking sharp, says Sam. I know some younguns who'd kill for those trousers an' all.*

The material is pressed, a vintage seam. A hand lands gently on them.

*His as well. Always said they looked better on me, though.*

At the foot of the bed there is a wooden chest, open. Inside, there are dresses, ironed and folded. Balled up tights and a few pairs of shoes. This chest will be closed, soon, as it has been for so long before. But it is not for Sam to close it.

*Daphnis, I reckon. Greek, and a poet. But Daph will do, out there. And if they ask, I'll just say the trousers are better for haemorrhoids.*

Sam laughs. The same person, after all. But this time, not bound. She offers her arm to her friend.

*Alright, Daph. We better get down there, or they'll have mutinied.*

A detour via the sitting room recovers the half-smoked cigarette and the tired audiotapes, played almost to their end. Daph will steal the paper from the library too, though Sam has said a hundred times that it is supposed to stay there. Some things you can change.

The flat door slams and unsettles a bird; it flies by the close window, screeching, renewed.

*Half a chance, eh?*

*Right enough,* says Daphnis.

It was solstice when it arrived. Six short hours of teasing twilight and I was at the baby's window, listening to her gentle cries, the lull before she threw herself over into distress yet again. Her body wriggled and I examined the paint cracks in the window frame, a sharp fault to show that the building had shifted. Of course it had; a hundred years ago the lives between these bricks were very different, and the tenements around here drop and rise with the fortunes of their tenants. Straight lines do not exist three floors high. But this fault seemed ragged and brand new, the paint at the edge traumatised, like the remnants of a muscle cleft apart by a blade.

It took just a slight movement for me to see it. Hovering a few feet above the post box, it was lit not by a glow but by a sweep of light, as if a photocopier were trying to duplicate it. It moved tenderly, like humming, and was gently opaque. In the halfflight I guess it was the size of a small car, but its surface had the shape and texture of a pebble, specifically one of the many layered stones that wash up on \_\_\_\_\_ Beach not forty-five minutes away.

It was after midnight, and a Tuesday, so the first to come upon it were a trio of football fans back from the pub. The singing gave way to entreaties to touch it, nervous laughter breaking a whispered reverence, but when the oldest reached forward and found nothing material there, the three scattered, screeching in such a way that brought neighbours to their windows or out onto the street.

My baby's noises crept towards crying, but I could not take my eyes off the ethereal rock. The gathering crowd found it unntouchable, too, and agreed that they could hear the tide in its hum, its quiet reverberation. Every person tried to handle it, and each would show incredulity, dismay and then something more combative. Scuffles began to break out beneath my window. Some claimed it as theirs; others proclaimed it must be removed. A dogwalker passed on the other side of the road and a mother in her forties ran over to take the dog, unclipping his lead and kicking the walker to the ground before stuffing the creature under her shirt. Bodies pressed closer than

they needed to. Neighbours long engaged in passive aggressive feuds brushed hands and began to kiss. A girl from the close next to mine recited a sonnet to the divorced woman at the corner, who climbed down from her window into the girl's ravenous embrace. The object touched everyone. And still I stared, working my finger into the sharp crevice in the window frame, working the fault deeper even as it tore at my skin.

The stone hummed louder, static, then just as they said, I heard the unmistakable push-pull of a current. I wondered what existed inside of it; I looked at my daughter and asked myself the same. Was there anything there I might recognise? When did she become alive, like me? I wavered on my feet. Within me, too, there were tides; rocks covered and revealed again. I felt sure that if I could touch the stone when no one was around, just me and it under the lazy summer moon, it would immediately shrink down to fit my hand perfectly, my hand alone. I could place it between my breasts, or push it down into my underwear. I could take it inside and bash my husband's brain in. I could wrap it in the swaddling blankets in the place of my baby, and let her out into the world, the simpler version of a child asleep in her cot; my tiny pebble daughter, so easy to please.

My husband dashed out of bed and thumped on our window; I could hear him through the wall. My daughter's cries built; push-pull, push-pull. My husband screeched *you're all I've ever wanted* to someone below, someone whose body pushed past me, straining towards his touch, as I left the house in bare feet and followed this new current to the coast. The coquettish summer sun, unveiling herself, showed me which way was west.



The wetsuit is still a little damp from the previous day - or perhaps not damp, but simply holding the cold. She drags the thick rubber up her thighs, slightly squeaking, and wrestles her shoulders into the body of it. The suit at her skin chills before it warms, before the blood in her body can generate its own heat. It is still two hours til sunrise, not even yet twilight, so dark Liisi must wear a torch over her thermal hat, because she needs both her hands for her morning's task.

She stuffs her feet into her partner's boots and takes her blanket and her flask of coffee from the floor. It is only a short walk down the hill but she finds herself jogging, as if she must outrun the break of dawn. But she is ahead - she is always ahead - and when she steps onto the beach she can still only see the rows of frozen pebbles by her own light. She does not go into the water; she never goes into the water, for it is dangerous to swim in the darkness, and especially when you are alone. Yet even when the sun rises the sea holds no pull for her. All the water she needs is right here on the shore.

She sips coffee til dawn, listening to the sweet lap of the tide, and finally the twilight shows the beach for what it is; not pebbles, in fact, but thousands of glistening, frozen eggs.

\*

The land on which Liisi awakes rises higher every day. It is marginal, the sort of thing you could never feel, let alone see; a process that began twenty thousand years ago when the sheer weight of ice depressed the Earth's crust, when the mantle shifted and the shape of the land changed to show it. A terraforming, but not by human hands; a change to suit a loss, to show where something had once been.

\*

The eggs arrived a week ago. A neighbour yelled over her fence - go see, go see. A small crowd where the sand meets the trees, and before them, thousands and thousands of ovoids, from toes to sea. They were perfect, and glassy; opaque in blushes of blues and mauve. *A rare meteorological phenomenon*, read someone Googling, *from water that's cold, and calm, with a beach that's slightly sloping.*

The newsmen came, and photographers, and, strangely, police. But no one touched the eggs, nor spoke of removing them, and by dusk, it was just Liisi and the thickening night. She waited for an hour after everyone had gone. She was freezing and hungry, and greatly unsettled - it was the longest she'd been out in months - but she knew she couldn't leave til she had seen for herself. By the light of her phone she picked a pink-marbled egg. She held it near her face, her breath and hands both warming the ice, and watched it til her fingers were blue, her forearms aching, her body trembling. She held it until it had melted away.

\*

The land on which Liisi awakes is rising; gently higher, day by day. It is the result of the planet undoing its damage; the weight upon it has melted, and shifted, and slowly the crust is recovering its strength. And with recovery, creation occurs. The island beneath Liisi's feet did not exist, once; there were a dozen tiny islands, each isolated from the other. But twelve thousand years ago the land began to rise, and above the sea level these islands met, and now there is a whole where before there were fragments. This is happening at a speed imperceptible to you or me. And yet Liisi likes to stand with her eyes closed - at the end of her garden, in the afternoons, when everything is quiet save for the birds - and wait for the sensation of lifting, of being lifted.

\*

The air bites tonight, for it is still the night - still seven hours before twilight arrives. It has been a week, and there are still so many. But there is no way of knowing how long they will stay; winter sun is low and fierce, and Liisi can see them shrinking, melting. So she pulls the stiff rubber over her skin, and it is clammy and cold, but it will keep her warm as she kneels amongst the ice.

She stuffs her feet into her husband's boots - still warm, she thinks, but it cannot be so - and takes her blanket and coffee flask as she goes. She has slept all day, and will work until morning, but as the sun comes up she will retreat to her bed. It is something she cannot stand for the others to see.

By her own light, she sees them. Waiting, pristine. As she works, you will not see the change; it is too slow for anyone to perceive. But it is happening; Liisi knows it is happening. She will take them in her hands, in her warm, human hands, and watch the ice melt over her white knuckles, until her palms are empty and she cannot feel them at all. The ice melting can change the Earth; can change the very shape of everything she will ever know. She will hold each one, every single one, just to check that there is nothing inside.

The two men enter the pub and order loudly in accents from the south. It is late in the evening but they are wearing their fishing vests over thin and untarnished t-shirts, and he reads them straight away: a new adventure, picking up habits from their grandfathers, making the most of being confined to these islands. Their strange attire is an attempt to both stick out and blend in; they hope that a sage old local might take them under wing. The young are always so keen for connection.

They sit down at a table spitting distance from his, and he watches them sink three pints as the other drinkers begin to dawdle home; everyone else knows to be fresh for the early start. But these lads are here for excitement, not calm. It will be years before they learn to appreciate the still water, the thrill of catching nature at rest. He's seen it so many times he could have painted these boys out of thin air. Finally, the pub is quiet enough that he can speak without raising his bitter-soaked voice. He taps his ceramic finger, the third on his left hand, on the table gently and they look his way.

'Castle Loch is it, th'morra lads?'

It is; it's their first trip up here, a long drive from London. They're staying at the Moby Arms. They almost drown him in details; inherited the vintage gear, bought some OS maps, left their devices behind. He lets their enthusiasm wash over him, lets it refresh some of his social desiccation.

'You'll be after the vendace, no doubt?'

They glance at one another quickly, eyes darting like minnow. They don't know about the vendace; it's not in any of their books.

'No, no, she won't be. And even when she was, they got it wrong. Small, short-lived, extinct; not one of these things is true.'

The boys have quieted now, have leaned in. The pub is empty except for them, and the barman has put on the low music that he likes to hear. He sits in the anticipation for a moment; swims around in it, remembers how it feels to be enveloped in the attention of others. Slowly, he begins to speak,

'None will admit it, for the sake of competition. But we've all seen her in the pink light of the morning, all had a chance and couldn't land her in the boat. She's canny, as survivors have to be. The name given to her is Clipper, the biggest vendace there ever was.'

He takes a sip from his warm pint; across the surface, the dregs of foam have settled like scales.

'My own grandfather used to bring me here when we lived much further north. Weekend escapes from the city where we stayed, just he and I out on his old boat. He was one for the still mornings, my granda, and wouldn't like me to speak until the sky was fixed in blue. He might stay silent til afternoon, that old man, and nothing I could say could tempt him from it. But when he did open up, he'd tell me stories about his past in the navy; about the men he travelled with, and being married to the sea. And one time, he told me about Clipper.'

It was a fishing trip home with his closest pal from the ships. A full week they spent out on that loch together, two young lads just like you both, catching nothing but butterfly bites, as if the

water had been emptied; as if the fish had grown wings and flown away. Six whole days they sat, nothing doing. And then on the last morning, something hit the boat so hard they were knocked onto their knees. From the bank they were seen, pointing and screaming at the water; bigger than a man, they said, and flashing like silver. They cast off and my grandfather got a bite; she dragged them for half a mile before they gave up their rods. They came home bruised and battered and barely speaking. Granda never went fishing with his buddy again.'

He raises his porcelain digit in front of his face. A ring finger long ago sacrificed to the loch. The lads might gasp, but all he can hear is the stillness of those mornings.

'A'course I didn't believe him one bit. A dozen times he told me, the silly old fool, and there I was disbelieving. But one early start on a too-hot day I had my hands in the water. And there she was, Clipper, just a flash and away. Big as a man, just like they said. And there was I, a boy in the water and one finger down.'

There are things in Castle Loch that everyone knows about. Things that fell out of the sky and things that hide under the water. Lockerbie is full of these little secrets, these remnants of the past. He knows there's beauty in that loch; it appears differently to each generation, but it is there. The young will see it too.

'She's a living fossil. From the last ice age, they say. But then you could likely describe me just the same.'

The next morning, as the day breaks, he takes his coffee to the front door. He will not head out onto the water today. The boys will see it for themselves.

*Viking, North Utsire; southwesterly 5 to 7; occasionally gale 8; rain or showers; moderate or good, occasionally poor.*

I had never drawn the land on which we lived; this was my first thought when we found out my wife was pregnant. Despite my job, I had never done it. I might sketch a cartoon version of a city centre for a children's treasure hunt, more illustration than anything else, or stretch my cartography muscles, spending a year detailing a continent - the way it really is, not the way you see on the classic maps, where things are distorted, the global powers given more weight, the undeveloped countries made small. I had drawn so much of the planet, but not our home; not the place in which I now had to build a safe harbour for a child. Cartography, and the abuse of it, had long taught me that the world could be amended, that the very material of it could be altered to fit our desires. But I never thought that I might control this. I never thought it was mine to control.

*Slow moving, declining.*

I listened to the Shipping Forecast a lot when my wife was pregnant, when we both woke on the crest of her nausea waves at five in the morning, and she found herself seasick on the bathroom floor, and I stayed beside her. She would wave at me to go to bed, but I knew we just needed to right this one room. If the bathroom could hold her gently, her stomach might calm. I brought the radio in from my office, in from amongst the rolled up semi-maps, my works in progress, and plugged it in to the hallway socket. At first it was sheer coincidence, finding it when I was looking for something without beat, something to act as background noise. The voice had a soothing quality; the words were so incomprehensible as to be almost hypnotising. My wife was asleep with her head on the cold tiles within ten minutes. I wrapped myself around her and found a video on YouTube: *5 Hours of the Shipping Forecast, Uninterrupted*. On the bathroom floor, we slept.

*There are warnings of gales in Rockall, Hebrides, Bailey, Fairisle, Faroes and South-East Iceland.  
The general synopsis: low.*

The first time, it was just a doodle really, a child's sketch of the house, done while I sat on the edge of the bath listening to the conditions around Fisher and the German Bight, and I drew the bathroom enormous, so expansive that it was easier to breathe inside it, with room for two baths, one for me and one for my wife, and a swimming pool between them, so my beloved could paddle lengths, could be part of the water, and there find a stillness she could not find on land. And when I looked up, the bathroom was bigger. Our tiny shower room was suddenly enormous, and when I looked out I saw that the rest of the house had shrunk until there was almost none of it left. I quickly rubbed out the pencil sketch and everything was normal. My wife had never looked up, never noticed a thing.

*Southeasterly at first in northeast Forties, otherwise southwesterly, 5 to 7. Moderate or rough in Forties, otherwise moderate, occasionally rough later. Showers. Good, occasionally poor.*

We knew so few other parents, through nothing more than circumstance; we were the oldest of our friend set, both only children from tiny families, and our town was a small one, where young people often left and returned when they were old, their own children, if they had any, grown and gone. We had family support and all the books, but we felt like we were drawing ourselves on blank terrain, carrying all the theory but seeing no other footsteps. There was no one to tell us that the term 'morning sickness' is a misleading one, and that sometimes, despite what the books say, the pregnant vessel can feel itself on choppy waters not just in the first trimester, but through all the long months of the journey too. So I drew, to make my universe smaller, more easy to manage. While my wife grew a whole life, an entire world within her, I thought the least I could do was make the outside one trivial.

*Low northwest Malin, one thousand and two, losing its identity by one eight double O Tuesday.*



I can only do it, now, when my wife is distracted; when The Shipping Forecast is hypnotising both her and our baby, informing them in impenetrable code of the fate of sailors off all of our coasts. Then, I sit down at my desk and redraw the world, restricting myself to a house no longer; now I sketch the country, and am working on a map of the planet, our home in the middle, only a little bigger than you might truly imagine it is, but the rest of reality so much smaller; everything else just in the margins, shrunk down as to barely exist. My wife and child will never know that I do this, that I remake the map so that they and I are magnetic north, that everything else orients itself to us. When the Forecast ends I erase the drawing, and the world goes back to how it was, and I wait til the next time. But in those brief moments, the world is small, and only we three truly exist in it, and I can keep my seasick family close, and tight, and with nothing but ourselves to trouble us.

*South Utsire; gale now ceased. Thank you for your company this evening. Wishing you a safe and peaceful night.*

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We knew so few other parents, through nothing more than circumstance; we were the oldest of our friend set, both only children from tiny families, and our town was a small one, where young people often left and returned when they were old, their own children, if they had any, grown and gone. We had family support and all the books, but we felt like we were drawing ourselves on blank terrain, carrying all the theory but seeing no other footsteps. There was no one to tell us that the term 'morning sickness' is a misleading one, and that sometimes, despite what the books say, the pregnant vessel can feel itself on choppy waters not just in the first trimester, but through all the long months of the journey too. So I drew, to make my universe smaller, more easy to manage. While my wife grew a whole life, an entire world within her, I thought the least I could do was make the outside one trivial.

*Low northwest Malin, one thousand and two, losing its identity by one eight double O Tuesday.*

I can only do it, now, when my wife is distracted; when The Shipping Forecast is hypnotising both her and our baby, informing them in impenetrable code of the fate of sailors off all of our coasts. Then, I sit down at my desk and redraw the world, restricting myself to a house no longer; now I sketch the country, and am working on a map of the planet, our home in the middle, only a little bigger than you might truly imagine it is, but the rest of reality so much smaller; everything else just in the margins, shrunk down as to barely exist. My wife and child will never know that I do this, that I remake the map so that they and I are magnetic north, that everything else orients itself to us. When the Forecast ends I erase the drawing, and the world goes back to how it was, and I wait til the next time. But in those brief moments, the world is small, and only we three truly exist in it, and I can keep my seasick family close, and tight, and with nothing but ourselves to trouble us.

*South Utsire; gale now ceased. Thank you for your company this evening. Wishing you a safe and peaceful night.*

*Evie won't eat figs. Evie won't eat figs. Evie won't eat figs. Evie won't eat figs.*

He repeated it as he twittered around the table, putting name cards down and switching them around, moving a candlestick here and then back to there, repeating the words again again so he might not lose them, so they might not fall out of his head somewhere between the table and the magnet-mounted notepad on the fridge. *Evie won't eat figs.*

He knew all the rest by heart; James hated sausage, Amelia was against parsnips, and none of the young ones would countenance anything containing mincemeat, neither fruit nor flesh. It may have been his first time cooking, but the last two years hadn't faded the memories of all the dinner table arguments before, all the turned-over plates and the crying fits and, later, the slammed teenage doors. There could be none of that now, not this year. So he added this to the list - *Evie won't eat figs* - and instead brought out a honeydew melon for his youngest granddaughter, so she could squish the fruit in her chunky hands and make a mess all over the cloth.

Scattered around the kitchen were a whole lifetime's worth of cookbooks, oil-stained and finger-torn and so broken in the spines that they lay open easily, inviting the reader towards one recipe or another. He had put together the day's menu from whichever pages seemed most used, imagined someone else's finger running down the ingredients list with the knowledge of exactly where everything was. He had taken every single tin out of the cupboard before realising that the Bird's custard was in powder form in the larder; had squinted at every jar he could find before reading the scrawled note saying *cranberry sauce, big freezer* in half-erased pencil. A man at the fancy supermarket had helped him buy things he'd never even noticed in shops before, the duck fat and the thin carved meats and the tubs for the steamed puddings. When he left, flushed and a little exhausted, he noticed the man had added a bottle of champagne to his bag, and he couldn't find it listed on his receipt. It was in the fridge now, waiting for stronger hands than his to open it.

The timer went; he checked his schedule. In went the pigs in blankets.

The preparation had started months before, not only because he wanted to get everything perfect, but because his days suddenly seemed long and bewilderingly open, and he knew that if he made too much sage and onion stuffing, there were three young boys across the road whose mother was having to work two jobs, after so many cutbacks, and so couldn't have much time to cook. A hungry mouth wouldn't judge an imperfect Yorkshire pudding (contentious, he knew, but there would be a riot if they weren't made). And so over the autumn, he and the over-worked mother had become friends, as you will with someone who brings roasted veg soup and a mushroom tart (for the vegetarians at the table) and then, just the week before, a whole three-tier fruit cake. Even he had to admit that he'd become quite the baker.

The gravy was sieved, the plates were warming, the crackers were delicately placed. No one would be forced to wear the silly crowns.

By the time they started to arrive, the turkey was resting on the side, the carrots glazed with honey and put in the top oven to warm, the steamed puddings tied with string and set on the back burners of the hob. They kissed him on his hot cheeks and squeezed his hands but he busied himself, moving as quickly as his old bones would let him, and hushed them towards the table, not wanting any praise or too many kind words, because this was a gift, to him. It was all he could possibly want.

There was laughter, from the dining room. As he checked the potatoes - a good crisp, and fluffy inside - he heard at least one cracker go. The crinkle of a paper hat.

He brought the starters to table; for Evie, who was so much bigger than when he'd seen her last, neat little balls of melon and a little raspberry coulis, though now he looked at her, he realised she wasn't a baby any more; she was almost four. As she popped the melon neatly into her mouth he remembered the champagne; James was dispatched to the fridge and Amelia brought the dusty flutes, a gift for his wedding, down from the top shelf of the sideboard. As her father made a show of ostentatious pouring, Evie reached over to her cousin's plate, thumbed aside the prosciutto and took the fattest, most succulent half-fig in her hand. Her grandfather watched as she took a moment to stare at the world of soft crimson seeds inside, such infinite possibility, and sunk her teeth straight in.