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A masterful, discreetly sublime book." —HERNAN DIAZ,

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF *TRUST* AND *IN THE DISTANCE*

CLEAR

The background of the cover is a dramatic, textured painting of a stormy sea. The waves are rendered in shades of dark green, black, and white, with visible brushstrokes. In the lower center, a small, ornate blue teapot with white floral patterns sits on a dark, jagged rock protruding from the water. The overall mood is one of isolation and resilience.

a novel

CARYS DAVIES

AUTHOR OF *WEST AND THE MISSION HOUSE*

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CLEAR

a novel

CARYS DAVIES

SCRIBNER

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

for Michael

1



He wished he could swim—the swimming belt felt like a flimsy thing and it had been no comfort to be told not to worry, the men couldn't swim either.

Each time they rose he glimpsed the rocky shore, the cliffs, the absence of any kind of landing; each time they descended, the rocks vanished and were replaced by a liquid wall of gray.

He closed his eyes.

Thump.

Dear God.

He clung to the gunwale as they began to climb again and he saw, above the cliffs, a thousand birds soaring and wheeling. When the little boat tipped, and plunged into the hollow trough on the other side, he knew it would be for the last time.

But after an hour on what one of the men described later as “an uppity sea,” John Ferguson found himself safely deposited, along with his satchel and his box, on the narrow strip of sandy beach that turned out, in spite of appearances, to exist in the shadow of the monstrous cliffs.

Oh the relief of feeling solid ground beneath the soles of his soaking shoes!

Oh the relief of watching the water pour off his coat onto the hard-packed sand, and seeing, in the distance—as Strachan said he would—the Baillie house, pale and almost luminous in the silvery murk of the afternoon.

With freezing fingers he unbuckled the swimming belt and tossed it cheerfully into the boat. He loosened his neckcloth and wrung it out and put it back on again. He squeezed the sea, as best he could, out of the sleeves and pockets of his

coat and jumped up and down a few times in his sodden footwear in an effort to warm up. He thanked God for his deliverance.

All that remained now, before the men pushed off back across the boisterous water to the *Lily Rose*, was for one of them to carry his box while he followed with his satchel, picking his way over the rocks like a tall, slightly undernourished wading bird, thin black hair blowing vertically in the persisting wind, silently talking to his absent wife:

“You see, Mary, it is all right. I am here. I have arrived. I am safe. You have no need to worry. I will do what I have come to do and before you know it, I will be home.”

2



The weather was calm and it rained softly.

Ivar worked hard all morning, laying new turf and straw in the places where the bad weather had torn up the roof, tying it all down with his gnarly weighted ropes. It gave him a good calm feeling to do the work—climbing up onto the roof and down again, trudging back and forth over the boggy soil and every so often pausing to sharpen his knife.

When evening came, he squatted close to the fire to cook his dinner, boiling the milk for a long time until it acquired the dark color and acrid taste he liked. When he finished eating he scraped the inside of the pot clean and wiped off the layer of soot on its underside, and after that he sat in his great chair with the cleaned pot in his lap because it was the time of year when the days are long and the nights are short and Ivar hardly ever bothered to lie down to sleep.

Outside, beyond the thick stone walls of his house, the island's contours retreated briefly into darkness but without ever really disappearing, and soon, through the opening in the roof above the hearth, light began to fall in a slowly turning, glittering column of chaff and fish scales and wisps of floating wool.

It fell on the trodden clay floor and the edge of the low table and the pot in Ivar's lap and on Ivar's sleeping face, illuminating it and separating it from the surrounding gloom the way some paintings do—a lined and weatherworn face, heavy, with a kind of hewn quality; not an old face, but not a young one either.

His hair was the color of dirty straw, his beard darker, browner, full and perhaps unclean, with a patch of gray over his jaw on the left-hand side that stood out from the rest like a child's handprint. Having no mirror, he had no clear

picture in his mind of his own appearance beyond the uncertain reflections he sometimes saw in the island's pools and puddles, though obviously he was conscious of himself in relation to his surroundings—that he was tall enough to have to stoop when he moved about inside the small, low-roofed house; that he was wide enough to fill the doorway when he ducked through it; that he was strong enough, in spite of his illness last winter, to accomplish all the tasks he needed to accomplish.

When it was fully dawn, he stepped outside.

The brook below the house had widened in the rain and everywhere the ground was sloppy. At the spring the mud lapped his feet.

He gave the old cow a drink of water and checked the knot on her tether, and then he went to find Pegi in the outfield and stayed talking to her for a while, patting her coarse and straggly mane with the flat of his hand. He called her an old cabbage and a silly, odd-looking person, and a host of other pet names he had for her in his language. In the early light her coat looked dusty and dull, a dirty-gray with a bluish-yellow tinge.

“*Prus!*” he said eventually, which was the word he used to tell her they had work to do and it was time they got going.

3



In the Baillie house, having unlocked the door and let himself in, John Ferguson emptied his satchel onto the narrow bed: his spare shirt and his second set of underwear; his comb and his soap; the blue ledger and his papers; his writing accoutrements and Mary's picture in its tooled leather frame; the pistol, the powder, the ammunition.

It was not so snug as Strachan had led him to believe—if it had been comfortable once, it wasn't anymore.

The narrow iron bed had no blanket, and the only other furniture was a low three-legged table and a single stool. He wondered if he might do better in the church, but when he walked down under a clearing sky to investigate, he found the little gray building was full of hay, and a good part of the roof had fallen in.

Well.

At least there was a cooking pot in the hearth, and on a ledge behind the house he found a small supply of peat. He also had his box, with Mary's fruitcake and his other foodstuffs inside. All of these things were blessings, and for each one he mouthed a silent prayer of thanks.

He also reminded himself that he had survived a long and horrible journey and was, praise be, no longer seasick. He gave thanks for that, too, and as he sank down onto the little stool, he reminded himself, also, that he was being paid.

So.

He would make a fire in the hearth and dry out his clothes and cook himself something to eat and try and get a good night's sleep, and in the morning he

would have a little look around the island, spend the day getting his bearings, and after that he would go and find the man.

4



Ivar led Pegi down past the spring and around the base of the peaked hill. The empty baskets on her back creaked as they walked.

Steadily they plodded in the direction of the shore until they came within sight of a low-lying spit of ground below the white hill that was covered by the sea at flood tide but lay dry at the ebb.

It was dry now—a longish bank that formed a neck of land between the two low stretches of water on either side—and it was toward this slender piece of dry, rocky ground that Ivar, after leaving Pegi to graze, was walking, carrying the wooden box in which he collected and kept his bait.

There was hardly any wind, only a faint breeze toward the shore, gentle and steady against his body and his face, and for a moment he stood enjoying the sensation of the wind ruffling his hair. He'd been out very little this past spring, first because of his illness and then because of the bad weather when it had been too rough for much outdoor work, and impossible to fish off the rocks—the sea restless and unruly and wild, spindrift from the heavy breakers striking against the shore and forming a deep mist along the coast. He'd spent most of his time knitting, mainly sitting in his great chair next to the hearth but also sometimes on the stool in the byre with Pegi, occasionally talking to her but mostly just sitting in her company with a sock or a cap or whatever else he was making. Walking along the bank between the two low waters in the lightly moving wind, he thought about that, the pleasure of it—sitting with Pegi and quietly knitting; Pegi very still, his hands barely moving as they worked the needles; the only other motion a cobweb quivering in the atmosphere near the ground.

As he walked, he bent over the pools, knocking limpets off the rocks and dropping them into his bait box, and then he walked back along the beach to where Pegi was grazing and together they went round the side of the white hill and onto the tops of the cliffs, past the church where he kept his hay and along the wall that separated the burial ground from the pasture behind it. He carried on past the Baillie house and skirted the pool where his mother and his grandmother had drowned the pups, thinking he would carry on to the inlet to collect the grass for the cow's evening fodder. But he was hungry now, after the cooked milk yesterday; tired after his short night dozing in his great chair. "You should go home, Ivar," he told himself. "You'll feel better after some breakfast."

He'll remember this, of course—that he paused for a moment above the Baillie house before making up his mind whether to go home or to carry on to the inlet for the grass; he'll remember that he looked down at it and saw nothing unusual, no smoke, no open door, nothing he wouldn't have expected to see.

5



In the Baillie house John Ferguson had been unable to light a fire and unable, therefore, to dry his clothes and cook himself any dinner.

The peats on the covered ledge at the back turned out to be full of clay and refused to burn, and in the end he'd eaten a slice of Mary's fruitcake and spent a few cold and miserable hours lying in his damp clothes on the iron bed.

As soon as it was light he got up, telling himself briskly that at least he could wash himself and put a comb through his hair. According to Strachan, the nearest spring was only a short walk from the house. If the day warmed up he could spread his clothes out on the heather, and while he waited for them to dry he could perhaps begin making some preliminary notes and observations before he went to talk to the man.

The important thing was not to become dispirited—the important thing was to remember that this was a job, an errand: a means to a very important end.

He said a quick prayer and pushed his feet into his wet shoes, picked up the gun from the end of the bed and dropped it, along with the ammunition and the powder, into his box.

Everything else he returned to his satchel—his comb and his soap, his writing tin, Mary's picture and the Lowrie ledger, his spare underwear and his second shirt, which were as damp after their dash across the turbulent water from the *Lily Rose* as the ones he stood up in—and then he set off, pulling the heavy, ill-fitting door closed behind him.

The day was clear with only a low line of cloud over the horizon, and if you'd been up in the sky that morning above the island with the gannets and the

guillemots, the puffins and the cormorants and the oystercatchers, you would have seen his tiny black figure leaving the Baillie house and making its way across patches of pink thrift and lush green pasture. You'd have seen it pause when it reached the first expanse of heather, and you'd have seen it remove its clothes and lay them out, along with the spare ones from inside its satchel, to dry. You'd have seen it (ivory white now instead of black), splashing about in the reeds around the spring. You'd have seen it make a few notes in the dark blue ledger, and then you'd have seen it get up wearing nothing but its satchel and its half-dried shoes and make its curious way over to the edge of the cliff and take a step down onto the rocky, precipitous path. You'd have seen it flailing, briefly, on the slippery stone, arms windmilling like a clumsy skater's, and when it vanished, you'd have seen its satchel arcing up and away and carried off over the water like some ungainly brown bird on an invisible current of cool northern air.

6




At the inlet, having decided against his breakfast, Ivar worked steadily, bent over and tearing armfuls of the luxuriant grass from between the rocks. Slowly he moved across them, picking the grass as he went, and it was here that he stopped and straightened himself and looked out across the water.

During his illness, dark, swimming patches had often appeared in his vision: black clots that floated before his eyes if he made the slightest movement, and for a moment he didn't move. There was a word in his language that described the covering and uncovering of a sunken rock by the sea, and it would have also described exactly the way the dark and lumpy object kept sinking beneath the shallow waves and then appearing again. He blinked, and when the dark shape was still there he dropped the grass and began to wade out, but the wind was blowing now, coming in gusts of increasing violence, and every time he reached for the lumpy mass it heaved away from him, out of reach. On the foreshore Pegi stood with her head down, the wind whipping sand against her flanks and into her eyes. Ivar snatched again at the floating object and this time he caught the edge of it and drew it close.

For a long time he stood on the beach looking out at the departing tide. Mist and fine rain were being driven before the wind. Sweet water trickled from the base of the cliffs behind him. He saw puffins and seals and cormorants, nothing else; for more than an hour he stood there but there was nothing and no one, no large vessel or small boat of any kind, and in the end he hung the satchel from his shoulder, packed the grass into Pegi's baskets, turned his back on the beach and went home.





In the satchel he found a bundle of sodden papers inside a blue cloth cover; a comb like the one Hanus had once brought back for Jenny from Bergen, the time he got the tea and the tobacco, only smaller and with smoother teeth; a piece of corn-colored soap, soft and squashy from all the water; a tin containing a small folding knife and what he believed to be writing implements; and right at the bottom, under the papers, he found a dark-haired woman inside a leather frame, looking up at him from behind a piece of broken glass with a shy and secret smile.

It was impossible to make out her surroundings, which were misty and brown and indistinct, as if she was standing in the grainy gloaming of an early winter afternoon. But the woman herself was as alive as anything he'd ever seen, and more alive, by far, than his memories of Jenny or his mother or his grandmother. In his whole life he had never seen anything like her. He touched her with his finger, almost expecting her to move, and for a long time he knelt before the fire holding her.

It was late when he stood up and propped her against the wall on the stone shelf above the hearth while he separated the soaking papers that were in the bag and spread them out in front of the fire to dry. If there'd been anything written on them, any words in English or Scots or Danish or Norwegian or any other language he didn't know and couldn't read, they had been washed away. The blue cloth they'd been wrapped in he wrung out with his hands and spread that out, too. The soap he lifted to his face but it smelled of nothing but the sea and he set it down on the hearth next to the comb and then, even though everything was already illuminated by the fire, he lit the lamp so he could look again at the smiling dark-haired woman who was somehow alive inside the frame and the murky brown darkness that surrounded her.



The picture of Mary Ferguson in the tooled leather frame was a calotype by Robert Adamson.

It was made in Edinburgh a few months after the Fergusons' marriage, and six weeks after the Reverend John Ferguson resigned his living in the city's northern parish of Broughton and became a poor man by throwing in his lot with the Free Church of Scotland.

"Me? Oh no, John. Not a picture! Not of me. Please no!"

But John Ferguson was too excited to be put off. "Not a *picture*, Mary. A calotype. A way of seizing and preserving a living image—from the Greek, from *kalos*, meaning 'beautiful.'"

John already had an appointment of his own with Adamson—the young photographer who had embarked upon the task of bringing as many of the rebellious ministers of the new Free Church as would come to his Rock House studio at the foot of Calton Hill. Working from the calotypes, his friend, the artist David Octavius Hill, would then paint them onto a vast canvas commemorating this historic split between the established Church and the new one.

Mary was nervous before the camera, and acutely conscious of her teeth. (It is, perhaps, why she looks so shy in the resulting image, and not as forceful as she could be in real life.) She also found the image a little ghostly in spite of its magical reality. She could see it was her own living self that the young Mr. Adamson had somehow seized and frozen with his liquids and his light—that it was undoubtedly her, standing on the sheltered, foggy-looking back lawn behind his

studio, and yet it gave her the unsettling feeling that she was looking at a picture of herself after she'd died; that it was some sort of memorial, or souvenir.

John, though, was enchanted.

Solemn, even severe, in repose, his bony Presbyterian face broke into a delighted smile when they returned to collect it and he saw for the first time what had been achieved. With effusive thanks to Mr. Adamson, he took Mary into the first small shop they came to at the foot of Calton Hill and spent what must have been almost the last of his money on a rectangular leather frame. With the calotype safely behind the glass, he slipped it into his satchel, kissed his new wife's hand, and said, "There. Now if we are ever separated, I will still have you with me, my most precious darling, at all times."



If a vessel had come and gone, Ivar hadn't seen it.

If a vessel had come and been sunk by the storm, he hadn't seen that either, nor any small boat digging its way fiercely to shore. He'd stayed inside all day and all night and hadn't stepped out until he knew the wind had died and he was ready to begin working on the roof.

He went down now to the beach to look for any bits and pieces that might have come from a wreck, but there was nothing. From the top of the white hill he looked out in every direction, scanning the water for the remains of a vessel or a boat or anything drifting, but there was nothing he could see from there either, only the pasture and the cliffs and the choppy wash of the waves near the beach, the swell further out. As the waves gathered toward the shore they resembled veins raised beneath the skin of the sea, moving in a shifting line that altered and broke like a line of geese heading north, but they brought nothing with them. He closed his eyes and opened his mouth, to hear better, but there was nothing then either—nothing he wouldn't have expected to hear.



When he went out again, later, he took the woman with him in the big pocket of his short wool coat.

He took her with him when he went to fetch water from the spring and when he went fishing off the rocks. He took her with him when he went to collect limpets and when he went to pick spurrey from between the potatoes to give to the old black cow to eat and when he went to the round hill to bring home the peats.