

2

It was the dead fish she noticed first. The silvery skin of ling. A clutch of coalfish tangled among seaweed. Other fish stranded on the sand. Too many to be normal or natural. Jessie had stood there for ages watching them, bemused at their arrival on the shore. And then there was the day a couple of seals were washed up, stretched out on the edge of the tide, their flesh squabbled over by gulls, torn and shredded. She had never seen anything quite like it in all the years she had stepped on either Garry Beach or the Tràigh Mhòr, looking for flotsam the Minch had washed up on the tide. Things like nets swept from the deck of a fishing boat, a shattered tree trunk that might have floated in their direction from one of the rivers in the Highlands, even once a thick *geansaidh*, stripped, perhaps, from a fisherman's back. These gifts from the sea were always useful. A net could be draped over the top of a haystack. Timber might be used for a roof or even to weigh down a stack of oats or hay. A *geansaidh* could be washed and mended, given to one of the many bachelors in the village. They were always in need of clothes and they sometimes had no women in their lives to help provide them. A few hours and the click of knitting needles at the fireside and a quick repair could be done, clothing provided that would keep them warm in the winter.

But the fish and seals were strange: the fact that they had

In a Veil of Mist

shoaled up dead on the beach in such numbers. The way, too, there hadn't been a storm a night or two before, as there so often was on this edge of coastline, bringing all sorts of arrivals to the coast.

Yet odder still was what Jessie encountered a day or two later. She saw it from a distance – on the border of sea and sand – shifting back and forth on the tide, as if it was breathing. It looked like a dirty rag of cloud that had been toppled to earth, though more solid and substantial than that. Like the mound of seals and fish the other day, the gulls were sweeping down to feed on it, calling out and tearing at it with their beaks. She made her way towards the heap, tightening her scarf against the chill of the wind, bracing herself against its force, gasping as she came closer to what the sea had left on the beach. She stepped forward tentatively towards the pile, walking past the cattle grazing on the machair's edge. It looked as if a clutch of small animals were spread out on the sand, all beasts unknown to her. They weren't cats and dogs, the creatures that the local crofters often drowned in the sea in these parts – when too many kittens had been born, when a collie had turned on someone or grown too old to round up sheep. Their presence would have no effect on her whatsoever. Far too familiar. No. This was different. Some of these creatures had white fur and small, beady eyes – those that hadn't had their sight plucked by beaks, that is. They had expressions similar to those of children who had just been born. Others were like rats, but fat and round, as if they had been over-fed. She had never seen either of them before. She shivered when she saw them, tugging tighter her old tweed coat. There was something that disgusted her about the sight, something that wasn't real or natural.

Jessie wondered how they had reached here, what time or tide had brought them this way. For a moment, she wondered if they had anything to do with the vessel, the *Ben Lomond*, which had been anchored in the Minch, not far from Tolsta Head, over the last week or so. Some of her neighbours had said there was something strange about it. It was a large grey boat, a converted tank-landing ship, bulky and oppressive, and then there were these motor boats that kept going back and forth to it, sometimes towards Stornoway, at other times towards some kind of platform that was a short distance away, those on board moving boxes to and fro. Sometimes they even hoisted the motor boats up the side of the vessel. This happened each time the waves grew high and choppy, when the wind rose up.

And some neighbours had seen the red warning flag being raised, a veil of white smoke rising from the pontoon's deck a few moments later. It trailed across its surface like sea-spray but more persistent and long lasting, misting the crest of waves. Some of the local boats ignored the signal. Pretending not to see the flag, they just carried on fishing. Domhnall Iain, a former fisherman and one of the village's older men, said it resembled the gas that had cloaked his trench when he fought in the Great War. Others laughed at him behind his back for that, dismissing his words.

'*B' eòlach do sheanair air*. Nonsense. He's never quite escaped from Flanders. His mind still goes back there from time to time.'

They were always like that, ignoring what they didn't believe or hadn't experienced. They were especially like that with Jessie, never quite forgetting the episode she had gone through back in the 1920s, when she was barely out of her

In a Veil of Mist

teens. George had never written to her from Canada or the States, wherever he now was – if, indeed, he lived anywhere at all. One time she had walked across the moor to the other side of the island, visiting one of her relatives, Catriona, who lived with her husband, Tormod, in the village of South Dell. Jessie had the strange notion she could call across the Atlantic to George from that shoreline, standing, perhaps, in the shade of the lighthouse that was a few miles away from their home, relying on the flash of its light to beckon him back to Tolsta. Or even use the foghorn she had heard about, summoning him with its deep, sonorous notes.

It was Catriona who, over the passing years, had convinced Jessie there were other methods she could employ to bring her man back home. Clasp hands and closing eyes, her cousin had uttered one of those loud prayers for which she was known. Some said Catriona did this so that her words could reach the house of her former father-in-law in Tolsta, part of the family who had raised her son, Roderick, after her first husband had drowned, falling from the deck of a fishing boat, his feet tangled in a net.

‘Oh, Lord, take care of Your servant Jessie here. Teach her that there are other ways in which her words can reach the man she wishes to marry, who lives so far away from here now in the New World, where he stays. Teach her to speak instead to You so that Thou might listen, pass on the hopes and dreams, the urgency and desperation of her prayers to the one she loves. Let us hope, that if he is so disposed, he might listen and return here to these shores or – if not – send her the means to make her own way across the seas to America. And if not, if there is no future for her and this man, teach her to be

content with this, to accept the wisdom of 'Thy will, in the hope and trust she can find peace and contentment.'

And Catriona had taken her home across the moor, near the shoulder of Beinn Dail, lochs and streams that were nameless to Jessie, unfamiliar patches of green bog. Her companion, however, had not taken her all the way to Tolsta. Shaking and trembling, Catriona had stood a half-mile away from the village edge, knowing that all around her was familiar – the edge of Loch Mor Shanndabhat, the beginnings of the Garry River – and she could find her way home. It was as if she was terrified of the sense of loss that might overwhelm her if she stepped any closer, glimpsed the boy she had been forced to surrender all those years before.

'*Siuthad. Siuthad.* You go on your way now. I don't need to go any farther than this.'

Jessie, too, had hesitated before going towards her home, aware that people would be talking, mentioning those hours of delusion she had suffered, the belief that she could call across the Atlantic from the shoreline of South Dell. She could imagine some of the village youngsters mocking and imitating her, standing on a pinnacle of rock and yelling towards the sea.

'Oh, George! George! Seoras! Seoras! Can you hear me?'

Or they might stand on the bridge that Leverhulme built in the twenties, the one they all said led to nowhere, part of a road that would planned to take people all the way to Ness, passing Caisteal a' Mhorair with its fallen, toppled stones, the shielings at Diobadal, Filiscleitir, Cladach Chuidhsiadar, all the empty places that had at one time rippled with the voices of people.

'Oh, George! Come back to me!'

She had taken a long time to regain the trust of people after

In a Veil of Mist

that, always conscious of the barely suppressed shrug when she spoke, the raising of an eyebrow, the look of dismissal in their eyes. ‘Oh, she’s becoming strange again. It’s happening once more.’ She did not want to go through the likes of that. No. She had to have proof that she had seen these creatures on the beach. Otherwise they would think she was going mad.

It was for this reason that she took off her headscarf, using it to wrap around one of the tiny creatures that had landed on the beach. An animal that looked almost human, with arms and legs, a tiny human head, a furry body and a tail. She walked home, taking the bundle with her. She would show it to those who lived around her, a dumb witness to the fact that she wasn’t – once again – going mad.

* * *