

## BIRDBRAIN

Fingal was in his Benbecula study staring out of the window doing absolutely nothing. He was good at that.

'Are you writing today?' Eilidh asked as she placed a mug of tea on the desk beside his keyboard. Fingal took this as some sort of underlying rebuke and didn't answer right away, believing she was suggesting writing was some sort of straightforward pastime.

He gazed down the croft to the western shoreline. There, in the silent distance, angry spume was being thrown into the air where the blustery weather was driving waves onto the rocks. He couldn't see the sea as clearly as he once could as a high bank of shingle was now in place; a wall built to combat erosion and reduce the risk of the land being flooded. He was irritated by Eilidh's interruption as he had been attempting to remember events from his childhood and struggling to get some sort of idea together.

'I need total silence to write,' he told her.

'Well, I'm not stopping you,' she said.

'What do you call vacuuming?' he said.

A memory flew down and landed on a large rock in the grass a few yards from the window. It was a small finch that was now drinking from the little pool of water that lay in a hollow on the stone's surface. Fingal's grandmother had told him that during the time of harvest the appearance of this little puddle was proof that rain had fallen during the night and the fields would be wet. He taxed his mind to recall in greater detail the island of his childhood summers; the stinking byre with mooing morning cows being milked, the smiddy with its roaring bellows where his farrier grandfather shod horses, hiding in dusty barn hay, dozing against a golden hayrick in summer heat or collecting eggs from the Andersen Shelter henhouse where the pungent smell of ammonia would catch in his throat. All long gone. He remembered croaking corncrakes in the warm evenings that were as loud as a pond full of frogs as he tried to get to sleep. Honking geese, shrieking gulls, the curlew's call, the clucking of hens and now, if lucky, perhaps the lone call of a single corncrake. These sounds could still be heard, but the detail of many childhood events was fading from Fingal's memory. All his life the island had been his escape, was called home even when it wasn't. It was the place where so many of his school holidays had been spent but now it looked like even the land itself could disappear.

His boyhood town had been in his opinion a prison from which any right-thinking individual would want to escape; a place only fifteen feet above sea level that had grown with the rise of factories and the expansion of its dockyard. The smell of chemicals from the plastic works, the soap factory and the refinery hung in the air like poison gas. There were woodyards nearby where in late summer feral cats screamed like fractious babies. It was so unnerving and at the time he had felt he was living in a surrealist nightmare.

His father at one time kept canaries as a hobby in the garden shed, their cages stacked in rows along shelves. Fingal felt sad for the captive birds, identifying with their situation, but he wasn't allowed to go near them unless his father was present, but he could observe them through the shed's small window. He held a sparrow once, rescued it from a cat that had pinned it to the ground. Its eyes were closed, but he could feel its tiny heart racing as he gathered it into his hands. Realising it was still alive, he reached up and put it on the edge of the shed roof as the canaries sang inside, watched as it perched precariously for a few seconds, waiting for its eyes to open, to hear it chirrup, to see it spread its wings and fly to freedom. But it didn't. It simply keeled over and dropped dead onto the earth at his

feet. The cat pounced once more, this time grabbing the bird in its mouth, and it hesitated for a second to glare at Fingal before it ran away.

‘How are you getting on now?’ Eilidh asked as she collected his now empty tea mug.

‘I’m not,’ said Fingal.

‘Do you want more tea?’

‘Aye.’

‘What have you been doing all morning?’

‘I was remembering being here when I was a boy.’

‘About what?’

‘Lots of things. I remembered being told that I might find a coconut on the shore that had travelled over an ocean, but I never did. Stuff like that. Sometimes I wish I could go back to those days. Nowadays it’s not coconuts that you might find but you will certainly find plastic bottles.’

‘I’ll get you more tea. I’m sure you’ll think of something to write about.’

Through the window he noticed the finch had returned and it was perched on the top strand of the fence that ran behind the rock. Its tail twitched up and down, its head constantly swivelling as it looked out for danger. Fingal imagined the barbed wire could be seen as a metaphor for its life. Perhaps even his own. As the wind buffeted and ruffled its feathers the bird spread its wings and opened its beak to perform an operatic chirping that no one would hear. As it finished it gave a bow and then cleaned its bill on the wire. It looked west. Fingal thought of the day before his grandfather died. When the old man had gazed sadly across those same fields with the knowledge it would be the last time, but this bird looked happy in some way, even although it was simply a small fluff of soft feathers in a big dangerous world. It turned and looked in Fingal’s direction, nodded confidently, then fluttered up into the wind and was gone.

‘Think I’ll give it up for the day,’ thought Fingal as he switched off his computer. ‘I just can’t get any ideas.’