

Above the Void

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Dedicated to my mum, Muriel Hooper, who taught me to write when I was ten, and introduced me to so many great books, including her own, which have influenced so much of my writing.

Observations

Privileged Information. 07.23.2014

US E3-Sentry early-warning aircraft reported sighting small black fast-moving flying object at 29000 feet. Craft placed on alert as they tracked the unidentified object. It was identified as a raven appearing to be flying at impossibly high speed. Captain reported having sighted whooper swans at this altitude in the past, but never a raven.

South of Nuuk, Bird Observation field station Greenland. 07.23.2014

Raven observed flying low over our field station in an eastward direction, apparently gliding effortlessly at high speed against the westward wind current. Noted down as unusual sighting.

Sermilik, Greenland. 07.23.2014

Raven observed flying low over Sermilik field station apparently having no trouble making good headway against prevailing wind. Speed very fast - impossible to estimate. Noted down as unusual sighting. Nuuk have a similar report, but it couldn't possibly be the same bird.

The Accident

Chapter 1

Melissa stood just a bit too close to the edge of the cliff. She could hear the distant thump of the waves meeting the shingle beach far below. The sea spread out before her, a moving counterpane, and she felt it would be so tempting at that moment to jump off the edge and glide the two hundred feet down into its gentle swell – glinting grey, blue and green as the morning sunlight caught it. She could smell the salty damp of it – it filled her with its freshness.

Behind her was her old life – the farmhouse, drab and half empty, his things gone. They had hardly exchanged a word. Their love was like dead flowers: blooms, petals, stamens all fallen off leaving the wrinkled browning stems in stagnant smelly water. She was left to clear up, clear out. A sad end to their life together. She wasn't bitter, she was numb – that was all. She couldn't feel... anything. No babies, no family, no job – nothing.

And yet, there was something. Something round the corner just out of reach – out of sight. She was a survivor. No jumping off the cliff. She could see it in her mind's eye.

'Melissa Jenkins found dead at bottom of cliff. Ex-husband said she was fine when he left her... deda, deda, dead'.

No she wouldn't jump, she would fly, or do the nearest thing to it. She turned round and walked back to the farmhouse,

and looked at the pile of her belongings that she had stacked outside the front door. She carried the few cases and boxes to the fallen-down barn, picked up her bicycle, and cycled down the hill towards the village to find someone who would take her belongings to the station. The wind filled her hair. The feeling of speed and exhilaration filled her body as she pedalled faster and faster down the smooth single track road to the village tucked in right at the bottom of the valley. Sheltered, homely, and hopefully, helpful.

The sea was just to her left, the green fields and patchwork landscape to her right. No traffic on this lonely road. Only her. And her thoughts. But they were being blown away by the wind in her face – just her and her bike going downhill at speed.

Free.

Always before, she had cycled down that hill knowing she would have to pedal laboriously up it again to an increasingly uncertain welcome at the top. Hard, hard suffering. Sweat and pain, for what? But now she was flying down the hill never to return. She would find someone to fetch her belongings and she would be gone.

Down in the village the clock on the church tower showed it was just after twelve. Melissa got off her bike, and walked into the pub opposite.

“Half a pint of Wye, Bert, please, and do you know of anyone who could fetch my stuff from the farm and bring it to the station?” She was still out of breath when she came out with this stream of requests, as if it was urgent. But actually, she had plenty of time. She had nowhere to go. No train to catch.

Bert looked slightly startled. The normally laid-back hippy-girl, that had come to his pub regularly over the last couple of years, had sped up into a dusty racing demon with the wind in her hair and the sun glinting in her eyes.

“Sorry to hear about you and Mike,” he stuttered clumsily. “I

mean, you know..." He stumbled to a halt. A shadow of self-doubt crossed his face... and then it was gone. He smiled, "Have this on the house, I'll give Sam's Taxis a ring for you if you like. They'll take care of you. What time's your train?"

She hadn't thought that far. She didn't even really know where she would go. Mum's was... toxic. Dad had disappeared again. And Daniel? No she couldn't go back there.

"I don't know which one I'm catching yet," her truth concealing a lie. "But if someone can get my stuff to the station... I can sort it out."

Suddenly she felt a bit pathetic. Sort it out! Sort what out? She looked round the pub. It was nearly empty. The lunchtime drinkers hadn't appeared yet and only a couple of walkers were there, hunched over a table looking at their map. Oh, and in the corner there was Leery O'Leary. What was he looking at her like that for? Creep. With his drinker's paunch and his roaming hands. And those teeth. She shivered involuntarily. No, she wouldn't go over there. Stay at the bar and sip her beer. Just try to remember it wasn't a glass of water.

Bert followed her gaze. "He's been spending most of his time here since he lost his wife." He said quietly, "He's harmless enough poor sod. Just drinking for Ireland. Used to be a good singer, probably still would be if he could remember the words." He paused, and then realised what he was meant to be doing. "I'll just go and phone them now."

Well, that will teach me to be so prejudiced, she thought, he's a fellow traveller. Curious how life brought you the unexpected. She shifted her gaze to the half open door, the sun shining in from the street and lighting up the dancing particles of dust, never settling, always on the move. She used to think of them as fairies when she was little, and now she just gazed at them, allowing her mind to switch off - thinking back through her life in a dreamlike way to how she had got here. It didn't look so bad

to start with, looking at it like that. Not such a tragedy.

A blessed childhood.

At least until the happening. But she wouldn't go there, not now.

Her mind went back to the rambling old mansion where she was brought up. Bits had been added on through the centuries, and by the time you got to the front of the building you'd time-travelled five hundred years to the eighteenth century, with its ornate plaster ceilings. Set in an acre of garden, this crumbling house provided a leaky and sometimes chilly residence for three families of humans and at least ten families of mice. The mice were kept in check by traps, poison, frying pans and anything else the humans could lay their hands on. But the humans increased in number in a most prolific manner – all three families boasting a large number of children sprawling through attics and cellars, kitchens and hallways.

Her own family lived on the ground floor, occupying the lower regions. Her mother's cousin's family had the first floor, and all the grandeur that went with it, and her father's sister Doris was up on the top floor with her smoker husband tch, tch, and their numerous boys. Auntie Doris was her favourite grown-up in time of need. Always had time for her. Always had a bicky and a drink, a listening ear, and a soft word. A refuge. Even with all those boys: Denis, Dan, Darren, Damian etc., she could still get her place with their mum. They were always off doing something in one of the small rooms that led off the attic that the boys all slept in. One massive room, she remembered - beds laid out like a dorm. But that was where the likeness to school ended. They all had freedom. A lot of freedom.

Maybe too much...

Things were a bit stiffer and more formal on the first floor. Good behaviour was expected, and there were the ornaments.

Ornaments everywhere. On shelves, on tables, in the little alcoves that were so great to hide in. The potential for breakage was massive. And these ornaments were dusted every day. Mum's cousin Iris thought that children should be seen and not heard. How she managed to live a floor away from Doris and co., Melissa never understood. Being the youngest of the whole tribe, there was a lot she didn't understand at the time. A lot.

“He said he'd pick them up this afternoon about two. Is that OK? Or do you want to speak to him, love?” Bert's voice jolted her out of her reverie. The motes of dust were still flying about in the sunshine, and she looked down at her glass. Empty. How did that happen?

“Oh, er, thanks, that sounds good.” What was she talking about? What sounds good? She didn't know where she was going, or even when.

The pub was beginning to fill up. Early lunchtime drinkers were filtering in, getting their pints and sitting in their accustomed corners. And there she was with an empty glass. Not half full, not half empty. Just empty.

She managed to catch Bert's attention after he had served a particularly large member of the lunchtime fraternity, so tall and wide that he seemed to blot out the sun and the rest of the bar for a moment.

“Another half of Wye please, Bert,” she said half apologetically. If she carried on drinking at this rate, she'd never make it out of the pub and into her future - whatever that was going to be. She never drank much: two halves in an evening. Alcohol had a very strong effect on her. She didn't get maudlin or aggressive - just talkative and friendly. But now she was drinking without feeling much at all. She'd better talk to someone or leave. No possibility of that - most of the men, and they were all men, were either huddled together talking to each other or looking like they didn't

want to talk to anyone.

But there was Leery O'Leary. Sitting in the corner on his own, looking round the pub with his soggy old eyes, hoping someone would talk to him. She went over to his table and sat down. He looked her over in that creepy way he had, and she shuddered but swallowed hard and tried to concentrate on the fact that he was a human being.

“All alone, love?” he asked. “No one with you today?”

“No, just me.” She tried furiously to think of something to say. “Er, lovely day, isn't it.” The sun, shining through the grimy windows of the pub, gave everything a slightly ghostly look.

“Is it? Oh all days are the same to me, love.” He wasn't going to help get this conversation off the ground, so she took a big swig of her beer and tried again.

“Um, I'm just moving out – leaving the farm...”

“Sounds good sense to me,” said Leery. “Wish I'd moved away when I had the chance, but I've got my council flat now and there's nowhere else to go.”

“Yes, well, I'm going... somewhere. Not quite sure where yet.” She looked down into her glass. That second half pint had almost disappeared, and her head was beginning to swim.

“You should go off travelling. Young girl like you. Take your opportunities while you can. That's what I say.” He gazed round the room as if searching for someone else to talk to.

Abruptly, he turned and looked straight into her eyes. His sad dog-like expression had gone, and was replaced by a piercing look – shrewd and bitter.

“Go! Leave! Get out of here girl, while you have the chance. This is no place for you. You don't belong here.” He said this under his breath and then looked away.

She felt fear then. Fear of no future – no place to go. Her heavy tear-laden past dragging her down with clammy fingers. She wanted to get out, out into the fresh air and sunlight, before all

her optimism was sucked out of her. She scrambled to her feet knocking over the chair, and ran out of the pub, and straight into the road.

There was a squeal of tyres, she felt a huge force push her off her feet, a deadening blow to the back of her head, and everything stopped.