

Boomerang

Her flight into Glasgow Airport from Heathrow had been over three hours late, delayed by a violent autumnal storm. Fortunately, Janis was travelling light, with only carry-on luggage. Her other worldly goods were in transit, heading for her sister's place near Stirling, *pro temp*. It had been Sylvia who had emailed the details for the funeral, otherwise she would have missed the chance to meet Calum again. Sylvia, no kids, was now on her fourth husband, Ben Scoular, running an antiques sale and auction business from a rambling smallholding.

At the Enterprise car hire desk there was nobody on duty. The notice read:

"Sorry, our computer system is down. Not our fault. Ask at Customer Services."

This photocopied notice was on display at the other unattended rental desks.

Checking the route and timings on her phone, she realised she would probably miss the ferry sailing from Oban to Barra. In part this was a relief, she had not been looking forward to the drive. Her long-ago memory of this road was that it was narrow, twisty, and in places, downright dangerous, especially the section beyond Tarbert at the north end of Loch Lomond.

At Customer Services, a long line of confused travellers were struggling to learn which flights were leaving from which gate. From their chatter, she soon learned the flight information system was off-line. Others, mainly large family groups, demanded to know when they might expect overdue incoming flights.

When it was her turn, a young man with a bright purple Mohican haircut, two rings through his left nostril, green mascara and bright orange lipstick listened attentively as she explained her problem. Without speaking, he checked a printed list, pointed to the flight she should take, sashayed from behind the high counter, took her hand and walked her to another desk where she could book a flight to Barra, one due to leave in just under an hour.

As she turned to thank him, he stepped back, placed his palms together, fingertips touching his chin, bowed deeply, lisping: 'Mrs Kilgour, thank you for your kind understanding and politeness. You are the first person who has offered a genuine smile all day. May your God go with you.'

Janis got the last seat. The Loganair twin engine turboprop was tiny, such a contrast to the massive Boeing 787 Dreamliner she had travelled on from Sidney to London. *And she would land on a beach!* - not a regular runway, something to put in her *WhatsApp* to keep Daryll and his partner Meryl in the loop during their travels. From their last posting a week ago, they were at the southernmost tip of Chile, making a video diary and using their camera drones to capture stunning images they hoped to sell eventually to film makers. "*Would they ever settle?*", she asked herself again. "*Unlikely!*", she thought.

00000

When the aircraft was above the heavy clouds, she closed her eyes and drifted back to her student years at Glasgow Vet School. In those days she was Jane Reid, 'plain Jane', as she had thought of herself, not like her glamorous sister Sylvia who changed boyfriends every week or so. Free of this 'competition', she intended to find someone who suited her.

The twins Alan and Calum McRobert were the boys in their cohort all the girls had fancied during 'freshers' week. Until they spoke, it was very hard to tell them apart, big hunky farmer's sons, tall, red curly hair, startling green eyes with strong bearded chins on perfect Viking faces.

Alan's voice was a high flamboyant tenor trill, Calum a gruff almost dour baritone, voices which matched their personalities. Alan was the party-animal, always leading their year group into fun, escapades which often ended in minor disasters. By contrast, Calum was quiet, thoughtful, serious, spending most of his time avoiding the rest of the group, usually settled in the library with several notebooks, a Tupperware box filled with felt-tipped pens in various colours, making copies of anatomical images from a large pile of open reference books, always neatly piled.

From Alan's chatter, they soon learned the boys were the younger children of parents who owned a huge five-hundred-and-fifty-acre hill farm where they bred pedigree Belted Galloways, selling them on each year as yearlings, the 'lucky' girls to become milkers, the 'poor' boys destined for butchering after fattening. In the second term of first year, after the madness of reckless partying had died down, Jane and Calum had paired up as 'study buddies', meeting at 'his corner' of the library on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, with Jane at her Netball coaching on Tuesdays when Alan and Calum were at Rugby training.

On these weekday evenings the library was usually deserted. Talking quietly, they were free to compare lecture notes, discuss issues and work on required set-piece essays and tutorial sheet questions.

Jane soon learned that she was quite a bit brighter than Calum who was a plodder but determined to succeed. During their café visits after the library closed, they chatted about their lives and families and their futures, after graduation.

Calum learned Jane was a townie, originally from Brechin. With her parents working permanently overseas for *Medicines Sans Frontier*, she had been raised from aged eight by her widowed Aunt Marion who ran a small animal practice from premises in the west end of Dundee. Sylvia had been left in Edinburgh, staying with Aunt Edith, a spinster, her mother's eldest sister, a QC who paid the fees enabling Sylvia to attend the prestigious St George's for Girls.

Boomerang

During every second of her free time, Jane had helped her aunt as an unpaid vet nurse, dealing mainly with dogs, cats and a wide variety of family pets. Although her aunt had never raised the subject, Jane hoped that one day this thriving business might become hers.

Jane also learned that Calum was more interested in Clydesdales than cows, seeing an opportunity to create a niche business of his own as a specialist horse vet and breeder. It was expected that his older brother Magnus, ten years senior to the twins, would take over the main farming operation when their parents retired.

Alan, too busy enjoying himself, had barely scraped through his exams and decided to transfer to Medical School. He was immediately accepted because of his six straight A results from his school Higher exams and his bubbly personality at interview.

Janis zipped forward in time to her favourite memory.

It was the end of the Summer term, the night after their final exams. They were both planning to return home the next day to wait for their results, both hoping to graduate in a few weeks. Jane was confident she had passed and was hoping for a 'Distinction'. Calum who had struggled at all stages with the academic elements, was certain he had failed. Jane thought this unlikely as he had top grades in all the practical elements, and, although he was slow finding the words, the annotated drawings he produced with ease were superb.

They had been out for a curry with a crowd who had headed off to a disco in town to party the night away. Walking side by side along the busy pavements, she had her hand snuggled in the back pocket of his jeans. This closeness had been developing over the last year or so and she enjoyed leaning into him, feeling 'protected' by his tall Viking frame. The sexual tension between them had been building for weeks. Nothing had been discussed but they both knew it was now or never.

In his bedroom, the heavy curtains were drawn. Behind them, the windows were open top and bottom to counter the summer heat. Three floors below, the students on Byres Road were shouting, partying loudly, the girls screeching drunkenly to each other, dodging through the traffic to meet up, hug and share the latest gossip. Calum had gone to brush his teeth. When he re-entered, he was wearing tight yellow boxer shorts. From the bulge, he was evidently ready. Leaning on the door, he bumped it closed with his bottom until the Yale clicked. He stood motionless, his face in shadow.

Under a single sheet, Jane was naked, wanton, urgently needy, sucking on a Trebor mint to counter the garlic on her breath.

Boomerang

"Look, Janey, this is just for the sex, right? I don't want you to get the wrong idea about this. I'm not making a commitment to marry you or anything, right? I'm wearing a condom of course, right?"

"Hey, Calum, that's fine by me. No need to make a federal case out of this, is there? Just satisfying our biological needs, eh? And you want to breed Clydesdales in Dumfries. I want to take over my Aunt Marion's practice in Dundee. So yes, this is a one-night stand. That's a given, OK?"

She threw off the sheet and it fell to the floor. This was her fourth time; her previous encounters had been with soon forgotten boys met at weekend discos at the Queen Margaret Union. These had been one-night stands too, unsatisfactory vertical sex with her back against a wall, her miniskirt up over her backside, her tights and panties already in her handbag from an earlier visit to the Ladies lavatory.

It was soon evident from his inept fumbblings that this was Calum's first time.

She had to lend a guiding hand, as she had done when helping new dogs mount their first female. After he was inside, everything was blurry. Thinking back on that night over the years, Janis had often wondered how many times they had coupled. Certainly more than six, maybe more than ten.

When she wakened to the shouts of dustbin men and road sweepers clearing up three floors below, she was alone. There was a note Sellotaped to the inside of the bedroom door.

Janey, I'm off home now to get my two mares ready for the Castle Douglas agricultural sales this afternoon. Enjoy the rest of your life. Calum.

00000

Janis was roused from her slumbers by the voice of the pilot sitting a few feet in front of her. She watched through the cockpit windscreen as the tiny plane swooped down through the rain to land gently then taxi back to the huddle of small buildings which comprised the airport.

She was booked to stay at a four-star B&B with a Mrs Evelyn-Ann MacNeil, a place recommended by Sylvia, whose second husband Alastair Agnew had been raised on Barra.

As Janis approached the car park through the drizzle, a tall fit looking thirty-something woman wearing orange dungarees waved to her. She was standing beside an ancient Land Rover pickup truck with a canvas roof, three Border Collie heads peering out from its rear. She was evidently expecting, six months gone, Janis reckoned.

Boomerang

'Hi-Ya! I guess you must be Janis, yeah? Thanks for your text message telling me you managed to change to Loganair. Did they tell you the CalMac ferry is off again, because of the storm coming in?'

'Evelyn-Ann? Good to meet you.'

'You should call me Ehvie-Ann, like the mineral water, right? So, hop in before the wind blows you away. Believe it or not, my mad hubby Kenny is out at his creels.'

Janis was surprised by her accent. There was a bit of Kiwi in there, somewhere.

'Thanks, Ehvie-Ann, good of you to come but I could have got a taxi.'

'Hey, no worries. Not much doing on the taxi front this late into October. Most of the taxi guys are in Spain, soaking up winter sun ahead of the Christmas and New Year rush. They go there to play golf and carpet bowls, or so they say. Who knows what guys get up to when they are off the leash, eh?'

'Really? What do their wives say about that?'

'Oh, they don't mind, it seems. They go to Tenerife where they do whale watching, snorkelling and parascending, or so they say on Twitter. Who knows what they really do, eh?'

'Globetrotting from Barra. Surprising.'

'So, here you are at last. Mrs Janis Kilgour, our world-famous Homecoming expat, right?'

'Hardly world-famous.'

'I hear that back in the day, when you were Ms Jane Reid you were an ace student in the Glasgow Vet School, right?'

'Oh, yes. I changed to Janis a few days after we landed in Oz. Jane is too old fashioned over there.'

'Hey, sorry about your hubby. A Black Widow, was it? Dreadful way to die, they say. Dangerous place, Oz. Better try NZ next time, much safer.'

'No, as usual the media got it all wrong. The inquest reckoned Paul died when his vehicle was caught in a flash flood, drowned in the cab. He was doing survey work for a mining company, a few hundred miles into the outback. The Black Widow spider got the sheep farmer who found his body. It was another two months before they found them. The sheep farmer was a loner, it seems. But look, Ehvie-Ann, that was fifteen years ago. And, for the record, Paul and I judicially separated a year after we married. So, it's all ancient history.'

'Well, Janis, tell all. Are you back for good or is this just a *flying* visit, ha-ha!'

Boomerang

'Honestly, Ehvie-Ann, I'm just not sure. It depends a bit on my son. Daryll is a bit of a nomad, always has been since he left school.'

'Ah yes Daryll and what's-her-name. . . Meryl, isn't it?'

'Yes, Meryl, that's right. But how do you know her name?'

'From their blog, of course. Now you have retired, have you had it with Oz, after the ACCC¹ debacle? I read all about it on *Google*. What's the *real* story on that one, eh?'

'Ah, sorry, Ehvie-Ann, that's a no-go area. I was compelled to sign an NDA to preserve my pension rights. Let's just say it was, eh . . . 'messy'. I'm still getting hate mail over what happened. Politics is a dirty business.'

'But some people said you were scapegoated because you were 'fearless' in your criticism, right?'

'Sorry, no comment. But why this interest in my past life? Surely it's not big news here in Barra. No one knows me here, do they?'

'Oh Janis, you'd be surprised, Janis. Out here in the hinterland, gossip is what keeps us going. But anyways, I got to know about you through your sister. We are both big Biffy Clyro fans. There's a crowd of us from Barra who meet up with Sylvi at his concerts. Anyways, we're all on your side and just to say, "well done", poking them in the eye over that horrendous live sheep transportation scandal and the falsified records.'

'Thanks, Ehvie-Ann, but let's leave it alone now, can we. And please, don't post anything on social media, promise?'

'Sure, sure, Mum's the word, eh?' She patted her tummy. 'Anyways, the funeral is all set for tomorrow. It took a bit of persuading by Calum and Euan to get the priest to agree to bury Alan. They're still a bit behind the times here on Barra when it comes to gays.'

'So, you know Calum?'

'Yeah, he's staying with us. He's been a regular since we started. He's been closer to Alan since his wife Lisa ran off with Magnus, his older brother. They're in South Africa now, managing a safari park. You can follow them online. Anyways, it all went apeshit in Dumfries after the mad cow cull. Magnus took the money from the Government pay out and bought RBS shares which of course bombed. Then he nabbed Calum's wife and left him to sort out the mess. It took Calum ten years but he's back in the black now with his Belted Galloways and his Clydesdales, of course. Thank God he had the foresight to ice

¹ Australian Competition and Consumer Commission is the chief competition regulator of the Government of Australia within the Department of the Treasury.

Boomerang

the sperm from their prize bulls, eh? By the way, don't tell him I told you, he is still a bit raw about it.'

'So, on your website, it says you have six double rooms.'

'Yeah, we're full tonight and tomorrow, all people like yourself, here for the funeral. A very welcome boost, now all the usual tourists are gone for the winter, right? Such a tragedy about Alan. Heart attack. Mystery is, he seemed to be as fit as the proverbial fiddle.'

'Did you know Alan well, Ehvie-Ann?'

'Yeah, of course. We all did! He was big into Highland dancing. Every chance he got, they would fly out from Glasgow to run classes on Saturday afternoons and then Kenny would play accordion with me on fiddle for his ceilidhs. Alan McRobert's all-night ceilidhs were *legendary*! Then, one night, he collapsed while calling us out from the front. He was right in front of me. It was just like that scene in *Four Weddings*. Euan was on him right away with the defribber but Alan was already gone, up there to dance with the angels, snuffed out at forty-nine. I can still see him lying there with that wee cheeky smile on him.'

'Yes, Alan was always a party animal. How is Euan holding up?'

'To be honest? Euan is a total wreck. If it wasn't for Calum, I think he might have topped himself. And of course, Euan's parents are very frail, so he needs to be strong for them. Marie is in the early stages of dementia and Euan Mor is on oxygen for his asthma. They get social care but mentally they have been knocked back by Alan's death. Personally, I don't see them making it through the winter but don't say I said that, OK?'

'Yes, I know what it's like. My Mum died a year ago but I couldn't get home for the funeral because of Lockdown. Two days later, Dad died. Grief, so Sylvia said. Ben did everything. I watched the double funeral on Zoom, all alone, weeping my eyes out.'

'Poor you. Yeah, Zoom's okay. But I use Skype to keep in touch with my folks in Christchurch, always have done. Anyways, you must be exhausted after your journey. If you like, I could do you an all-day Scottish fry-up or maybe you would prefer to shower then crash out until dinner? With any luck we might have prawns and lobster on offer. Or I have an organic lamb casserole in the freezer as a back-up. We do all our veggies out of our polytunnels. So, what dahya say, Janis?'

00000

The funeral service in the tiny church of *Our Lady of the Waves and St John* at Vatersay was a depressing and dismal affair with numbers reduced by the steady downpour which persisted until late afternoon. Only a stalwart few made it to the graveside where, thankfully, the committal service was brief.

Boomerang

The wake at the *Castlebay Hotel* was well enough attended although Janis was surprised it was an entirely teetotal gathering, learning when Alan and Euan were married, they had decided to commit to sobriety.

Calum and Janis rode back with Kenny in his Toyota Truckman pick-up heading back to Borve. *Tigh Cladach* (house by the shore) stood high above the curved sweep of a three-mile white sand beach. The rain had stopped, with high clouds clearing from the southwest but the shoreline was still being pounded by Atlantic rollers, the remnant of the storm. Directly to the west, the nearest landfall was Newfoundland almost two thousand miles away.

Standing side by side, they watched as Kenny drove away with the two younger dogs to check on his sheep who had been lying low during the storm, hefted in nooks and crannies.

'Well, Janey, here we are, alone at last. Do you fancy a walk along the beach? You could borrow wellies from Ehvie-Ann's rack in the porch. She has them in all sizes. And spare anoraks too.'

'Wellies? Ah, yes, you mean 'Gummies'. Sure. Just let me change into strides and put on a warm cardie, OK?'

'Good idea. Five minutes, then?'

They met suitably attired at the porch. Since arriving the day before, Janis had been watching Calum closely, surreptitiously. Although slightly stooped with wiry greys in his curly red hair and beard, he was still fit and trim, the classic image of an active outdoors man, reminding her of Paul Kilgour.

Changed from his formal, dark green suit, Calum was wearing a well-used Barbour waxed jacket and dark brown trousers tucked inside green wellington boots. Hanging from his shoulder was a Sony camera which looked like one Daryll owned.

Janis had re-done her face and combed through her shoulder-length auburn hair which she had tucked up under an old wine-coloured, short brimmed rainhat, a legacy from her student days which had travelled with her from Dundee to Canberra, when she had made her move as a young mother with Daryll only fourteen months old.

Checking herself in the mirror, she added a dab of her new perfume behind each ear, this Jo Malone fragrance bought duty-free during her transit at Sidney airport.

As if by canine intuition, the one called Fly, the oldest of the three dogs, was waiting to heel by Calum's side, tongue out.

'Well, Janey, which way, left or right?'

'Let's have Fly choose for us. "Fly, off you go girl!"'

Boomerang

The dog stood still and looked up at Calum, who patted her head. "Fly, *getaway* with you!"

The dog turned and trotted off stiffly down the slope directly for the water.

'She's fifteen now, past her best.'

'Like us?', she said, with a chuckle in her voice.

He smiled.

'No, not at all,' he replied. 'I would say we are in our prime, older and I hope wiser but still lucky enough to have our health and free to enjoy our dreams. Let's go.'

As they set off after the dog, she stepped in closer, placed her hand in his, leaning in, resting her head on his upper arm.

'Do you want to go first, Calum? Tell me what happened?'

'Not much to tell, really. I'm sure you'll have heard all the gory bits from Ehvie-Ann.'

'Well, what about the Clydesdales, did that work out as planned?'

'At first, yes. But it was hard to make a profit from it. Then I discovered my real niche. It started by painting my Clydesdales, just as a hobby, selling prints online. Then the requests came in, dozens of them. In those days, building up my reputation, it involved quite a bit of travel. Maybe that's what caused the split. Looking back, I realise now that was when Lisa and I were drifting apart. Then the finances went haywire. When Magnus bailed out, I downsized the farm to make ends meet. Alan chipped in to help me, emotionally as well as financially. He was, well, *wonderful*. It brought us closer. Nowadays we concentrate on stud work, breeding Mares on the Clydesdales side and Bulls on the Belted Galloway side. We are a small team, but we rub along fine. But the real money spinner is still the pet portrait side. Horses, dogs, cats, even snakes. If you have a pet, send me a batch of photos of it and I'll paint it for you. A sort of immortality, I suppose.'

'Do you not miss your children?'

'No, not really. Not after my ex-wife sent me a DNA report proving they were not mine, that Magnus was the father. Seems he has a special gene 'fingerprint'. Actually, I never saw her twins. She was only four months pregnant when they eloped to South Africa. But Janey, enough of me. Your turn.'

'OK. The long story short is, when I returned to Dundee after Uni, my aunt had just been diagnosed with breast cancer. It advanced quickly. The word got around. A big multinational pet vet group made her a good offer which she accepted. I nursed her to the end then decided to make a fresh start. I got half of her money; the other half went to Sylvia. I think the rest is history. I'm sure Ehvie-Ann will have filled you in with my gory details.'

Boomerang

They walked on in silence until they reached the water's edge. Fly stood in the shallows, the waves washing over her. Calum crouched, framed her and took a stream of images.

'Ah, are you intending to paint her, for Kenny and Ehvie-Ann?'

'Yes, that's the plan,' he said, over his shoulder.

Rising, Calum turned, took Jane by the shoulders, holding her at arm's length. His face was serious, his eyes anxious.

'Ehvie-Ann tells me you have a son, a photographer, Daryll Kilgour. I looked him up. He claims to be Scottish.'

'Yes, Paul was not his father. I told Daryll when he was twenty-one.'

'I looked up his birth certificate, did the arithmetic.'

'Good for you.'

'Janey, am I his father?'

'Yes.'

'Janey, why oh why did you not tell me?'

'Calum, it was what we agreed. A one-night stand, right?'

'But Janey, for me it was amazing, unforgettable. I have thought about that night every day. I should have stayed that morning, asked you to marry me but I was sure I would fail my exams and that you would say no. So, I made up an excuse and left that note. When I got my results and I had passed, I told Alan what had happened and he said I was a complete prat, that everyone knew you and I were perfect for each other, that I should drive right away to Dundee and ask you. But I thought I would see you at the graduation ceremony. I asked around but no one knew why you graduated *in absentia*. I thought you did it to avoid me. Is it too late to ask you now?'

'OK, Calum, give it a go, why not?'

'Janey, will you marry me, please?'

'Yes.'

'Shall we go back to the house and seal the deal before dinner?'

'Sure, why not!'