

PROLOGUE

Michael cut the engine on the outboard and let the dinghy drift in towards the Skerry. A petrol feather of peacock blue slipped into the wake of the boat, shimmering in the evening sun. A fine day and a gentle wind blowing offshore.

‘The fuckers.’

It was low tide. Brown tangle smeared the black rocks.

‘The bastards.’

Michael tipped back his head, the base of his skull connecting with the top of his spine. Above, the Sistine blue cupola careered away from him. His head felt heavy. He closed his eyes, listening to the slap of salt water against the blue fibre-glass boat hull. *Wooden boats? Far too much maintenance.* Wrapped in canvas in the bottom of the boat was the rifle.

Michael waited.

Then from the town came the noise of the pipe band. The bass drum first.

It boomed two beats then was joined on the third by the thrash of the side-drums.

With the convergence of the pipes he reached down to unwrap the rifle. The first bullet pierced the skull. Soundlessly the head slapped away from the impact. The crack alerted the others and they floundered with ungainly heavy flopping towards the sea. They were hauled high up on the rocks and Michael had already picked out his sequence of shots. The second shot went in at an angle as the animal was turning. It scored through the blubber and soft tissue like a knife through grease, bruising to rest against a section of vertebrae. The third entered the animal towards the tail flipper, causing it to collapse almost at its destination, the protecting sea, lurching, still alive.

All the seals were moving, and the Skerry erupted into a splashing mass of heavy flesh meeting water.

‘Wait yi bastards....’

Wait....

Yi fucking maggots.’

Michael let them dive, waiting for the heads to reappear. He lined up the sights of the rifle on the water about twenty metres from the Skerry.

As the heads appeared above the surface, he swung the rifle over.

After that he just took pot-shots but he was pretty sure he got three more in the water.

The injured seal was flicking its upper body in ever heavier efforts to move. Michael trained the gun on its head. The boat was only about twenty feet off the rocks. The killing shot landed right above the eye.

‘That’s fine.’ And Michael lowered the gun, keeping his gaze on the still hulk for a moment. Once they had swum out of range there was no point wasting bullets. The bodies would slide off at high water, gently rolling down to the bottom of the sea. It would be a good few days before anything appeared on the shore.

The pipe band was keeping up its medley of Scottish marching tunes. As the parade came through a gap in the houses, the music swelled out towards the sea. Muffled between the cavernous buildings, the volume temporarily subsided, only to swell again further along. All eyes would be on the parade. The police would be marshalling the floats. The pier head would be ten deep in crowds and Michael would take down a carry-out later and mingle with them all.

I cannae dae it mither... the words crackled through his brain and even the shots couldn’t dull them. But killing something made him feel easier, it returned some power.

With one pull on the cord the outboard rasped into mechanical life. Pushing in the choke, Michael pulled the tiller in towards him.

He felt better. Setting the boat round the back of the holm and in towards the harbour. Two half hitches on the handrail at the steps up to the old stone pier. Then he folded the canvas back round the rifle, securing the cloth parcel with an old piece of frayed end line from a creel. Entering the black shed from the seaward door he put the rifle up on the rafters, fastening it with a chain and padlock. He would make sure there was no chance of losing his license.

From the bottom of the close he could see the parade. It was stuck at the Hotel because of the traffic coming off the ferry. Through the narrow close he could see the crowd with eyes fixed on one of the fancy-dress entrants. Michael reached into his back pocket for his tobacco tin taking a ready made roll-up from the box and slowly lit up, heaving the sweet smoke into his lungs.

What the fuck..?

He felt mild amusement and in that moment superior, spectating on the drunken idiocy of others so ready to make fools of themselves.

Seana Rufus. Seana fucking Rufus... dancin' aboot in a fuckan' Red Indian get-up.

Fuckan' heedcase...

'Pissed as fuck,' he said out loud.

He leaned on the wall and smiled.

'Snotty little cow she wis.'

Michael walked away from the crowd.

He knew he could lay his hand on the bottle of rum. Still wrapped in brown paper from Harald Jeffrey's shop. Willie Bremner's rum, secreted there like a totem or a threat on the high shelf in the shed. Part of the legacy. Part of the things he knew he must resist

or had no right to like that girl in the parade... Seana Rufus. He knew his place and in the shifting sands of belonging there were truly no rules. *Jis kis yi wur born here disna mak yi wan o' iss...*

‘Ah fuck it. There’ll be an end tae it.’

The gala week was reckless and unsettling. It shifted people. Unhinged drinking took hold of the place lurching at the stays that normally held everything together. The community became a restless body loosening the strait jacket of the usual daily mores. Michael knew that to survive and stay in control, he had to keep sober and aloof. But the unsettling stuff had already begun. Seana and his mother.

Everybody in the town knew it now – old Agnes McLeay’s mind was gone. Visiting his mother in the Eventide Home, Michael was alarmed at what she might say, what she might ask him to do. More than once she’d asked him *to finish her off*.

‘You could do it son, pit me oota this useless state...’

‘Whit di yi mean mither?’

‘Yi ken fine whit I mean! Pit me ower the Crag.’

Her speaking like that was bad enough, like it was just asking you to go out and get a quarter of Pandrops.

His mother, never more lucid, never more serious, or rational with this one shred persisting through the dementia. He pretended she was ranting.

‘Yi canna spik like that mither.’ His mind in turmoil because she always returned to the same subject in one form or another, accusing him almost of cowardice. It reeled on and on in his brain, the dilemma, the justifications, getting her to stop that talk.

Yi canna jist feeninsh fowk off whitever they say tae yi...

Then Michael met that lassie, the Postmaster's daughter Seana Rufus and her one of the clever ones that had been in his class at the school and witnessed every particle of his humiliation. It made him want to flee.

PART ONE

in 1957

Annie hurried Tom out of the house to go for the Doctor, 'He'll never get his car up here. Yu'll hiv tae get him in the tractor.' At the top of the hill the snow was creamed into troughs and covings, immaculately sculpted between the dykes. Tom tied his scarf round his face and set off hunched. He could see the sky, itself pregnant and heavy with the next fall of snow. The loch was frozen and the perfect flatness of it was like a whole new country undiscovered. It made you want to walk out onto it and disappear.

Back in the upstairs bedroom of the farmhouse Agnes McLeay pressed her face against the damp plaster to get some coolness. The sweating wall merged into her skin and soon was made warm and she had to turn her cheek again. The fire was too hot. The ripping pain of the contractions was the constant, around which everything else rotated. Grabbing the underside of the mattress and pulling, then becoming consumed with such weakness that everything swam. The smell of Annie's sweat as she leant over her with a dampened cloth and the piercing glow of the fire that was too orange, a hot wire in her head. Her own voice issuing a moan as if it was no longer part of her. Then she cranked her body right up into a tight coil. Ratcheted everything up to breaking point and held it for a few seconds. She felt the grating of a boulder in her anus. *So hard*. Everything was subsumed into getting rid of this stone lump.

Like shittan' a neep.

And it started to go. There was no way back. It might rip her in two but the baby had to move. Any control she might have had was now gone and she wallowed in the great waves that pulsed through her. Unnaturally strong they were, coming from some muscle force unknown with a strength and will of their own. Like being pummelled and pulled, wound up and released.

Annie was darting over to the window to look for the tractor.

‘Come on lass, try an’ haad back a bit.’

Annie leaned into her sister on the bed and absorbed the possessed groans, the wrung-out sounds that Agnes made, ‘Damn thing, get this damned thing oota me.’

Time was different, minutes were hours, and everything was measured between groans and the hideously contorted looks on Agnes’ face. Then Annie heard the slow ‘putt’ of the diesel Fergie tractor as Tom pulled into the yard quickly followed by the louping of the doctor as he took the stairs two at a time. And she breathed a little easier.

Annie stood back as the doctor took over in the room. He said little, working between Agnes’ knees, feeling and measuring with his fingers. His jacket off and his bare arms beneath rolled up sleeves. It seemed unnatural to see a doctor’s flesh... his suit trousers stuffed into Wellington boots.

‘Been going a while?’

‘Yes Doctor’ replied Agnes in her special doctor voice. ‘She started at five this morning.’

‘Okay, the baby’s coming, but she’s pretty tired’

Agnes lifted her eyelids dreamily, resigned to submit blindly to whoever took charge.

Within the hour Michael McLeay was born in the upstairs bedroom of his aunt and uncle's farm-house. It was November and his father Harry, his brother George, his sister Shirley and a grandmother he would never know, were living in a brown canvas tent, heated by a cast-iron canon stove that bellowed black smoke over the white landscape. Like a moored steamer draped in tarpaulin. Tinkers.

Agnes slopped back into the bed with the relief of the expulsion.

Annie whispered to the doctor more than a little excitedly, 'that's the caul is it no, Doctor? Hid's got the caul?'

He was piercing the amniotic sack that still surrounded most of the baby, feeling for its mouth as you might clear out a lamb's. The doctor ignored her and carried on, slipping the sac away from the mouth, cutting the cord, and swabbing the stump. He held the baby up by its' legs. Like a drowsy lamb, the new-born twitched and let out a bleat.

My hid's like a skinned rabbit...but everything's there anyhow.

Annie made the quick visual check for 'normality'.

'It's a boy Mrs McLeay,' pronounced the doctor.

Agnes felt a wave of heaviness engulf her. Until that point in the day she had heard only the creaking of the old farm-house, empty of the noises of young life but full with the sounds of ancient floor joists shifting with Annie's heavy tread and complimented with the delicate fragrance of fungal growth. The sound of the child's snorting breaths seemed strange and loud in that old dead room. The fire sparked violently and sporadically as it ripped through a piece of barnacle-encrusted driftwood that Tom had chopped up. It snapped Agnes back to the realisation that the birth might be over but the work was just beginning.

‘Wu’ll put by the caul Doctor...hid’s good luck.’ Annie scooped the limp remains of the amniotic sac onto a tea towel as if it was a great treasure. She set it on the dressing table anticipating the time later on when she would pin it out on a clean piece of lining paper. Annie felt busy and important, and composed herself to wrap the boy in a towel.

The doctor checked his watch.

The baby out, there was still the afterbirth to come. Agnes again gave her body up to spasms and with the final remnant from her womb ejected, the Doctor wrapped the bloody placenta in a torn sheet and passed it to Annie. The placenta was of no interest to Annie. It would go into the kitchen stove to be burned.

After it was all done, the doctor took a dram downstairs, Annie shooing the favourite farm cat off a chair for him to sit on.

‘Aye she’ll be pretty well tired out. You’ll need to give her plenty of time to recover.’ ‘Hid’s a relief hid’s all by wi’ an’ a grand healthy boy too’. Childless Annie beamed with the closeness to it all.

‘Don’t ken why she had so much bother – he’s no that big...wi’ the caul as weel. A sure sign o’ good luck fitivvur.’

The doctor laughed, ‘You surely don’t believe all that stuff these days do you?’

Annie smarted. ‘Well there’s no harm in it. The caul’s good luck.’

The doctor conceded, ‘I suppose there is no harm in it, though some of these old tales are not so benign... I was thinking of the Fulmar oil the Saint Kildan women used.

The poor things dressed the cord with it. They thought it had protective properties...

Turned out it killed most of them,’ and the doctor drained his glass.

His cheeks were flushed with the whisky.

Annie declared, 'If you're born with the hood you'll never die of drowning, so they say anyway and Tom added, 'I knew a sailor that paid ten guineas for one, but then sailors are a superstitious breed.'

Tom set off to take the doctor back to his abandoned car in the tractor. He climbed into the metal box hitched onto the back which that same morning had been used by Tom to pick up stiff dead ewe from the field.

Upstairs in the house Agnes was staring at the plaster showing through the faint floral wallpaper where the wall had been rubbed. Awareness was dawning that across the room there was a baby, that she would have to heave herself into its' life. She could hear the small grunting noises it made and felt herself resenting its helplessness. Then the irritation changed to a flood of sorrow and she welled with tears at the aloneness of the new child with no-one truly but herself in the world.

'I made my bed' she was thinking.

Her only act of impulse, just four years previously took her away from the bounds of a simple damp croft house in the country. Remembering the tart words of her mother, 'Yur bed, yull hiv tae lie on it lassie...' Pulled in and ensnared by the sweet trickery of handsome eyes. Big black-haired Harry the tinker as he was then, trailing her away from the islands and off through Caithness.

'I burnt me boats weel an' proper.'

Her face and arms were weathered with the tattie picking, strange against the white sheets in Annie's sterile bed. Agnes lost her place back in her old life and the only one that still spoke to her was her sister Annie. She knew she was watched and despised, a stranger in her own environment, hardening a place inside herself to deal with it all and shut out the whispering... *a dirty passle o' brats*... Shirley born in Inver, George at Rogart, and now this one, Michael in Orkney at Annie's.

in 1958

Five miles from Annie and Tom's farm and five months from the farmhouse-confinement another birth was awaited. The year had moved a notch across the bridge of Hogmanay to 1958, and in an upstairs bedroom in the fishing village, Sadie Rufus leaned on the window sill before sitting herself down on the edge of the bed. In the town the people had long given up the superstitions of the country folk. John Rufus was preparing to attend a Town Council Meeting. Little Isbhail wanted a sister and had prepared a display of all her dolls in anticipation of the new playmate. She expected an instant friend that would arrive already able to walk and talk.

'Aye, you go John.'

'Aye' conspired Sadie's mother, 'yur no use to us here. A man's just a pest around a birth.' Like he was a bluebottle that had to be flicked off the sugar.

The house had been taken over by ample-bosomed women with fat arms and brown teeth. John Rufus collected his meeting papers from the hall-stand and edged his way out through the front door.

'You'll have a bairn by the time yi get back.'

He walked down a rugged cobbled hill past the harbour, filled with the varnished hulls of Norwegian whaling ships. The evening was grey and chill, a sullen north wind the reminder of weather to come. Inside the meeting room the town councillors were assembling at their usual seats around the long heavy oak table.

'How's your wife John? Baby due now is it?'

The very weight of the table imbued the councillors with solemnity. The joking and greetings were in a different tone from those they would use outside that room.

Chairwoman Baillie Harvey's human form took on box-like proportions. She walked unevenly on two corners, her mottled bosom resting like a monstrous toad under the sheen of her blouse. The stiff tweed of her suit-jacket folded over the corners of her shoulders and in the ante-room she transformed herself donning her chain of office, the cold clunk of democratic responsibility lying dead on her chest.

The room was too small really for such grandeur, and the Baillie had to edge her way to the high-backed carved chair-of-office behind the row of lesser red, upholstered ones. She pressed her way against the brocade wall-paper, her mouth drawn down at the corners, her glasses and greying hair framing the heavy folds of her cheeks. She was top of the tree in the town.

The others hushed as the gavel came down and she cleared her throat.

'Meeting of the town council is now convened.'

The eight townsfolk awaited Baillie Harvey's announcement of the agenda. Elizabeth, the voluntary secretary sat at the Baillie's elbow and the councillors in their accustomed seats around the heavy oak table – a gift from the consul of Norway. The meeting room overlooked the harbour and many a gaze would drift from the harbour to the painting that hung just above Baillie Harvey's head. The picture illustrated the form of a past dignitary of the Town who now brooded vacantly down from a shiny but warped canvass. His features became the study of many hours of contemplation especially during the lengthier and more boring agenda items. Of great fascination was the pet seagull he posed with, his hand set gently on the back of the bird.

The secretary leaned her sharp features into the minute book poised to scribe as the local news reporter sitting on a mere folding stool by the door, turned to a fresh page in his spiral-bound notebook and licked the point of his pencil.

‘We have a lengthy agenda. First, apologies.’ Baillie Harvey netted her audience, glancing around them to command their attention, her eyes sombre over the tops of her spectacle frames.

Eventually the meeting wound its way through the repairs to drainage and reached the part that the councillors looked forward to most.

‘Item seven on the agenda. Housing allocations. Harbour Terrace.

We have applicants to consider for the vacant property at 6 Harbour Terrace.’

John Rufus leant back in his seat, seizing his chance to shoot across the bows of the Baillie.

He said, ‘I propose without further ado that Mr and Mrs McLeay, whose names are next on the list for a house be allocated the property at 6 Harbour Terrace.’

There was a moment’s silence as the reporter scribbled in shorthand.

Baillie Harvey stiffened and looked at the reporter, ‘Mr Walker, would you care to lift your pen?’

‘Well, Mr. Rufus, I think your proposal may be a little premature as there are other factors to consider in the allocations process.’

John had been waiting for this of course. There was always jiggery- pokery surrounding the allocations.

‘I think we can take this item in public,’ he stated shooting a look at the confused reporter.

With the exclusion of John Rufus, most of the town councillors found the meetings tedious. The housing allocations were always a little more interesting. The merits and demerits of the applicants could be weighed and discussed, Jean Armett, who had an incurable and debilitating muscular disease, James and Rena Flett whose baby had encephalitis and an outsized head, the Bakers who were a hard-working and honest

family now that Tam had joined AA, and all the while thin slivers of gossip were filleted from the debating process.

The town councillors saw their roles as guardians of the status quo and aspired to a town council seat much as they might also wish to be church elders on their passage up the social ladder. It was a type of thin snobbery that irked John Rufus, knowing well the cosiness that could damn and exclude without recourse to reason. He saw through the faint veneers and endeavoured to use his cleverness to manipulate them all around to his point of view.

‘I disagree, with respect Baillie Harvey. I don’t believe any of us sitting round this table are in a position to objectively decide on the suitability or otherwise of any of the applicants for the house in a fair manner. The only way we can be truly fair is to take the next name on the list, the applicants who have arrived there by dint of waiting. The next name I see is Mr and Mrs McLeays.’

John Rufus steadily pressed his point ever so slightly honing the vowels of his speech to remove the chumminess from their common dialect. Even addressing the tinker McLeays as ‘Mr and Mrs’ was challenging their perceived status within the room.

‘The Tinkey McLeays?’ hovered unsaid between the painted seagull and the brocade wallpaper.

Baillie Harvey pulled her lips together over her tea-stained teeth. The other councillors shifted uncomfortably. She thought it had all been cut and dried earlier. Announcing herself on the telephone by her first name, ‘Ena’, in order to cajole through familiarity, Baillie Harvey had already contacted all of the councillors (with the exception of John Rufus). She had made sure to outline the credentials of her favoured new tenants for the lease of Harbour Terrace.

‘The Pattersons are a very nice young couple. He’s active in the church and they really would be such an asset to the town. He needs to be nearer to his work.

☞ ‘Yes just started in the bank.’

☞ ‘Uh huh, the daughter of Angus Williams.’

The qualities of the Pattersons’ had been well outlined in Baillie Harvey’s unofficial pre-meeting and she was certain there would be no need for a vote. Looking around the other councillors she failed to catch an eye that would make a counter-proposal.

‘Mr. Rufus does not seem to have a seconder. Are there any other proposals from the committee?’

No one moved.

‘In that case I wish to propose Mr and Mrs Patterson, who have approached me as Mr Patterson needs a house near to his work at the National and Commercial Bank.

Perhaps one of you would like to speak to their suitability and we can resolve this without a vote.’

‘Oh but I think we should have a vote Madam chairman.’ John Rufus spoke straight launching a spanner directly at Baillie Harvey’s cosy works and did not shift his eyes from her direction. The Baillie raised her chin, ‘Do we have a seconder for Mr. Rufus’s proposal?’

A hand was gingerly raised, ‘In the interests of democracy, ma’am I’ll second.’

Jamieson the crawling baker. always on the side of the angels,

and John Rufus was momentarily grateful for Jamieson’s support whatever the motive...

The secretary and the reporter scribed in unison, heads down.

‘Do I have another seconder?’

Three hands motioned and grunts of ‘Aye’ accompanied them, securing Baillie Harvey’s motion.

‘Mr. Anderson, thank-you. Any further proposals before we go to a vote?’

Heads remained still.

‘Then you may speak to your proposal Mr. Rufus.’

‘On a point of order Madam, the vote is about whether we take the case of someone who is next on the list for the house or someone who has made a personal representation to yourself for housing and who has only recently joined the list. We should not be discussing personalities at all here.’

The others were reluctant to get involved. They did not want to see themselves quoted in the local paper. Eyes averted to the gully between the edge of the table and area towards the floor.

Tinker trash, those folk don’t ken how to look after a decent house’

Baillie Harvey was still confident she could win, despite John Rufus and his pedantic communist procedures.

‘Very well then, we’ll go straight to a vote.’

‘A roll call please.’

There was an intake of breath. Now the names of who voted for whom would be recorded and maybe even published.

‘Elizabeth, will you call the names please?’

Those for Mr Rufus’ proposal, that we should take the next name on the list which is the McLeays.

‘Anderson?’

‘Against’

‘Campbell?’

‘Against’

‘Rufus?’

‘For’

‘Sinclair? And on it went.

John Rufus won the vote 5 – 4.

‘Very well, we’ll take that as carried. And I hope you do not have cause to regret your decision in the future.’ The Baillie’s head twitched back and forth, unsettled by the upset to her pre-ordained plan. She had already told the Pattersons she would give them the key after the meeting so they could go in and measure up for curtains.

When the report of the meeting came out in the paper everyone would know how the votes fell. It was unusual that any decision could be pinned on any individual.

The political process shambled along nudged by innuendo and gossip, bristling personal hostilities and un-researched prejudices.

But the McLeay children would grow up knowing who at least was on whose side.

‘It’s a girl, John. You have a daughter. And she’s got the red hair. The red hair of the Rufuses.’

In the upstairs bedroom a green-painted wicker Moses basket held the baby. All but one of the posse of midwives had left. ‘In the end she arrived so fast the doctor nearly missed her. He says he won’t be doing any more home births. It’s the hospital now. They’ve got oxygen and all the things you would need...you know if it had to be needed,’ gabbled Rita Ratter informatively. Always at the back of their minds was the horror of a deformed baby. *A vegetable.*

John’s wife sat propped up on the bed red-faced, a Melaware teacup and saucer by her side. Sadie Rufus let her eyes rest on the gilt-edged, Bakelite handles of the Ercol

bedroom suite. They had bought the whole matching set, and it was a huge extravagance but austerity and the post war years were a fading memory. She felt the warmth of optimism and contentment.

‘Did it all go ok?’ her husband asked still thinking of the meeting in his head.

‘Aye it was fine. She slipped out like a puppy.’

‘It went to a vote. Aye, I pushed it all the way. They got the house.’

‘That’s good.’

‘But Ena was seethin’ though.’ John Rufus allowed himself a smidgen of glee at his housing victory. ‘You could just see it in her.’

‘Will it be Seana then?’

‘Aye Seana. A memory o’ the Gaelic.’

Seana, aye it’s unusual, Gaelic for Jane.’

tinkers though

A housing allocation letter was prepared for the McLeays offering them the tenancy at Harbour Terrace. Elizabeth the secretary, on her heavy black Imperial typewriter, punched a hole through the thin typing paper with every full stop then scuttled round to the Manse with the completed letter for Baillie Harvey’s signature.

Next day, as John Rufus sat behind the Post Office counter, he saw the portly Baillie as her frame filled the half-door into the office. Their roles had shifted for daytime along with their clothes, John was now the Postmaster and Baillie Harvey was Mrs Harvey or even Ena to her friends in the Church Guild.

‘I don’t know where we’re supposed to send it. Does the post office deliver to tents? I imagine you’ll know.’

She pushed the letter under the brass grill of the post office counter.

‘Thank you Mrs. Harvey.’

There was a fleeting moment of coolness as the acknowledged opposing perspectives lingered between them. But in the end it was a small place and everyone had to find a way to co-exist with everybody. That they both knew.

John left the warmth of the coal-fired Wellstood stove and made his way to the bottom of the lane to take the car, a second-hand black Morris he'd bought from a shopkeeper in Dounby. Setting his hat on the bonnet, he cranked the engine, and on the third pull it shuddered into deafening life. It seemed like the loudest thing in the world. An uncompromising statement of mechanisation among the streets of footsteps and conversations. Brittle hail-showers were starting, the sky heavy with impending snow. The Paynes Grey colour of November, so beautiful and foreboding. The hail rattled on the bonnet of the car ricocheting off the windscreen and soon the road to Skail was covering in white, the narrow tyres of John's car carving a solitary path into the tarmac.

Not far from the prehistoric village, was the McLeay's tent. Brown and sagging with what appeared to be several layers of sailcloth, it sat behind a dry-stone wall with smoke emanating from a funnel at the end. Firm hailstones gathered in the folds of brown canvas.

'Aye? Harry? It's John buey. Are yi there?'

John stood outside the tent.

The flap opened.

'Mr Rufus.'

Inside the darkness, the warmth from the stove fused the aromas of breath, sweat and slept-in clothing to a sweetly repelling stench. Two children of indeterminate sex

peered from smoke-stained faces. The whites of their eyes the only clean thing about them.

‘The letter about your house Harry,’ said John in formal English He remembered then that Harry couldn’t read as he’s signed the application form with a cross. John reverted to dialect, ‘Wid yi like me tae read it oot?’

From the back of the tent a huddled shape in manila blankets and a crocheted cover moved and uttered shrilly, ‘I’ll no kin be movin there intil a hoose...’ Sutherland Highlander’s brogue. Then something in Gaelic.

‘But it’s a fine house Mrs. McLeay, and the bairns will be able to go to the school...’

‘Never mind her Mr. Rufus. She disnae ken what she’s saying. Agnes’ll be happy, Sir. She’s at her sister’s with the bairn. She had a long time of it. Aye Mr Rufus, the days o’ living in tents is weel past, an’ the bairns will be able ti go till ae school an’ learn ae readin’ an’ writin’. They’ll be better ‘n me in time Ah hae nae doot’.

‘I said I’d pit in a word to the baker for yi Harry. They need bake hoose staff but it’s nights, yi ken.’

‘Aye Mr Rufus. Ah’ll try that. Ah’ll try it. Things is changin’ an’ Ah’ll hiv tae try an’ work in a job regular like.’ Harry the tinker with the naive enthusiasm of a child in a new world.

Michael McLeay was never inside the tent at Skail. After a month at the farm he was brought as a baby straight to the new house at Harbour Terrace. There was stuff still in the farmhouse that was so big and heavy that Annie thought it would be grand to get rid of it. All the inherited furniture of Tom’s mother felt like a burden to her and she was glad to claim the place for herself. She got Tom to take the tractor and trailer down to the town with the cupboards and bedding as well as a massive wardrobe.

