

Rowing

She pulled harder on the oars. The scull skimmed over the glassy surface, cutting the water clear, leaving hardly a wake, every stroke accompanied by the muted scrape of wood on metal, a slight sparkle from the early morning sun as the oars splashed, and her groan. Heart pounding, blood coursing in her head, pulsating, burning pain in her arms, she toiled onwards, melting away towards perfection of movement, willing herself beyond herself. A few seconds later, the air still rushing massively in and out of her lungs, her arms searing now, her head at one with her heart, thumping in unison, she sensed the glory that rowing always gave her: If she rowed hard enough she could become herself and remain within herself, retain herself just for her, hold herself dear to herself for those few moments of exhilaration before the sensibility of her daily routine began. Sometimes, she wondered whether others had to pull so hard on their oars or push themselves in a similar manner to find themselves. She suspected not really to then marvel at her capability to control her elation. She could produce it when required and hide it when not in place. "Oh, such control, how marvellous," she thought.

In the boat house she showered extensively. She'd need to get a massage later on. She hadn't pulled that hard since last summer. She hadn't even been out here on the river for a long time, too much work lately. And Richard, of course. Walking up to the house she looked around her. It was a beautiful morning, so still, so serene. The river shrouded now in haze, the sun becoming stronger, the birds twittering in their joyful birdy way, the grass cool, amazingly green round her beautifully pale feet. She loved this place: was so glad she had bought it back then when property had slumped so drastically; was so glad she had this piece of earth where she could find her true self, get away from her other self, her other life, her loud, bright city life.

She wrapped herself up and sat on the terrace gazing at the little piece of world round her while her tea cooled. Fruit lay untouched on the table. Somehow or another she was unwilling to eat, it would break the magic in her; a magic particularly strong and enduring that day.

Seemingly hours later, she shuddered as though waking up.

"Damn, what time is it," she thought. "God, I've been here far too long. Shit, the meeting will already have started. Oh, I'll call in and say I'm on my way."

She padded indoors, her feet still bare, and picked up her mobile, suddenly experiencing it as a strange thing; a foreign thing; foreign to herself; a threatening thing; a thing threatening her little piece or peace of world here. She'd had two calls.

"Probably Sheilagh," she thought, "Desperately trying to locate me. Without me, the meeting would just fall apart, have no content. It was my idea, my dreaming, my doing."

Of course, the others had, as always, fallen into line, done their part, trusted her blindly but it was, as she always like to put it, her baby, not theirs. Without them she would never have got to where she was, but without her they wouldn't have either, neither the team nor the company. Nothing would have happened had she not been there. She was pivotal.

She looked again at the phone. It made her feel uneasy. Inside she felt a sudden coldness, dark fear like a huge shard of black ice moved within her.

"The tip of an iceberg," she thought carelessly, barely wondering at the strength of that sinister feeling. "What's that? Oh, it'll go away," skimmed through her mind as she called her voicemail.

The first message wasn't Sheilagh at all. It was her mother. Again carelessly, she wondered only ever so slightly why her mother was calling at this time of day, her mother being one who likes to sleep long into the day. Having scarcely registered that her mother had called she waited impatiently for the message to end, without listening to the words her mother left. "I'll call her this evening", was all she thought.

The second message wasn't Sheilagh either. It was Richard.

"I'll call him at lunch," she thought once again while not listening to what he said. "I do like him," her mind wandered off, "No, I don't." it boomed in from somewhere. "What was that?" she wondered. The thought got stopped there immediately, and she galvanised herself into action: getting into London; the office; looking the normal Kathrin; playing the normal Kathrin part; being herself; being Kathrin; the wispy dreaminess of the early morning gone; the well-oiled, business day running as usual. No time for uninvited voices booming in there.

Driving down the lane to the main road she realised she had forgotten her phone.

"Damn, what's up today, I'll need to turn." Instead of accessing the main road and turning at the next junction, she stopped at the field gate. A three-point turn in the squelch; cows looking on docilely, benevolently, as they stood patiently waiting for the farmer to open the gate; udders full, ready to be emptied by machines, all slipped idly through her head.

She unlocked the cottage door and picked the phone up from the kitchen table. Her mother had called again but hadn't left a message this time. She clicked with her tongue, irritated, and ignored the feeling of impatience rising in her. Phone in hand, about to be in handbag, she was on her way to the door when it rang. She almost jumped. It seemed so loud.

It was Sheilagh.

"Hey Kathrin, a very good morning to you. I'm just doing those last final itsy-bitsy ends and then our show can roll. You up and ready for it? I'm raring."

"Listen Sheilagh, I'm on my way to A&E, have to see a doctor – I'm not well. I've spent all night up and nothing I take appears to be making an ounce of difference," Kathrin heard herself say. "I won't be in today. I'm sorry. I need to hang off now. Will call later. Bye."

She hung up. She couldn't believe what she had just said. Not one word of it was true, all of it a blatant lie.

"Why?" she wondered and started again out to the car, wondering how on earth she could explain that one away when she arrived in the office.

Kathrin lowered herself onto the black leather seat. It was pleasantly warm, comforting somehow, like the car industry's attempt to re-create the womb. She pondered a few more seconds before turning the ignition, but to no avail. She couldn't fathom what she had just done so couldn't dream up a fitting excuse for it. Before driving off down the lane she switched off her phone, a thing she had never done during woken hours. It was always on, always.

She drove along the lane, dreamy somehow, unconcentrated, past the gate, now with no cows, but soon found herself looking at their grimy rear-ends as they walked slowly, udders swinging, in front of her. There was no chance of passing. She dropped back a bit to avoid scaring those docile mamas with no babies and rolled slowly along behind them. The cows turned off left to the farm. She went straight on, still not fast but faster than a cow she thought while idly wondering why she wasn't rushing to get into the office on time. Then she remembered her lie. She drove faster. The lane came to its normal end and she turned out onto the road. Her foot went down as soon as she hit the main trunk road.

She felt she had been driving interminably.

What seemed like hours later, she started wondering where London had disappeared to and started looking for signs.

"Oh my gawd, I'm going in the wrong direction. How can that have happened? Kathrin, you haven't been out at the cottage for a while but it wasn't that long ago."

She tried to recall when she got on the road. She couldn't really remember it, couldn't remember turning in the wrong direction at all; only had visions of udders swaying between filthy cows' legs.

"Damn," she thought and decided to get off at the next junction.

She got off at road services. She could dimly remember being there years ago when she was small; still a child; her big, proud father overseeing her pale, weak mother driving; herself feeling bouncy in the back but keeping still and quiet anyway.

She remained in the car a while before going for a cup of coffee. Perhaps that would clear her dreaminess a bit. She hadn't drunk coffee for years though. It hyped her up; made her shaky and left a slight headache dull behind her forehead.

She was still parked outside the services restaurant. The day was well started now; the meeting would've started too. She remembered thinking this hours ago, shortly before seeing the enormous patience of those fully uddered cows. Why had she thought that the meeting had started back then, so early? In her life, big meetings didn't start before 10am. She looked at the car clock. It was just past ten – the meeting would've started. She sighed, felt slightly confused, couldn't make head nor tail of herself. "At least I've already put in sick," she thought, remembering the conversation with Sheilagh. "Perhaps I really should go and see a doctor. I'm certainly not right today, not at all."

Languidly, she deliberated on what to do. The sun poured into the car. It was becoming hot in there. She opened the window; the sun was warm. It was a beautiful spring day, with nature rejoicing those rays; nature was in its starting blocks just waiting to explode in the weeks to come, spring weeks, then summer.

"Summer into autumn, winter and then spring," she thought, "How many times have I gone through that cycle?"

Last time she had been here at these services it had been raining, pouring. She could remember being told off sharply for running off to the tiny play park. Two things hadn't been right then and her mother had admonished her:

"You'll get wet and catch a cold. And do you want to spend your summer holiday in bed with pneumonia? And you should never run off when so close to so many cars. Imagine if a car hit you, what then?"

Her childhood had been full of such admonitions. It was always her mother, who seemed to know everything, especially all the bad things that could happen to her.

Occasionally, not often, her father would catch her doing something but he would coax and comfort her out of it in his big, proud, funny daddy way. He knew more than her mother; she'd always been sure of that. He had a richness her mother hadn't. "Bless him," she thought warmly, and then cooling off distinctly she remembered that her mother had already called twice that day.

She listened to the noise of the traffic on the nearby road; feeling the sun on her now bared arm. It was loud, she wanted quiet, she realised. She rummaged in the glove box for a map. Not finding one, she drove off the slip exit behind the services into the English countryside. Again, what seemed like hours of minor roads and lanes later, she turned into her own lane; saw the cowpats she had squished earlier on while following the cows; looked into their field to see a few of them lying, chewing, ruminating; doing those cowey things that cows always do. She reached home, the cottage, opened the door and went straight to the phonebook. She called the local GP she had been going to for years now.

Later on, sitting at the health centre she started feeling like an imposter. There was nothing wrong with her. She was just a bit dreamy today, that was all, and probably overworked too. The last few weeks had been almost frenetic. She sometimes wondered how Sheilagh and the others could always keep going.

"Ach, they're a great bunch, they really are, all of them. I'll call in again later on."

She was also curious as to how the meeting had gone.

The doctor came and picked her up from the waiting room. She put down the magazine she hadn't been reading and followed him into his surgery. He offered her a seat and glancing at his PC to assure himself of her name asked,

“Well, Kathrin, what can I do for you today?”

She just stared at him. Somehow, all thoughts she had ever had, all words she had ever known had flown out of her mind. She wasn't even sure her name was Kathrin.

Someone squeaked “Pardon me?” into the room. She presumed it was herself. She felt she was somehow squirming in the plastic chair; sweat was pouring off her – she suddenly felt absolutely dreadful.

“Kathrin? What can I do for you? How are you?”

Again, the squeaky voice,

“I'm sorry I'm just wasting your time. I'm fine really, I really have to go now. Have a meeting”.

She tried to stand up. She couldn't. She felt bound to the plastic chair. A vision of her standing up and walking out with the chair stuck to her rear end crossed her mind. She could hear someone wailing. She realized it was herself. She tried to gear it down to more of a sob than that particular wail. The wailing just got louder. Panic raised its hideous head. She was screeching now, appeared to be clenched up like a fist on the floor.

“Where's this floor, I don't know it,” she thought. “Where am I?”

The screeching suddenly stopped. She could hear voices murmuring somewhere but could only see bluey-greens on cool lino tiles. There was a terrible light blinding her otherwise. A prick in her arm and an overwhelming, all-encompassing sensation of wellbeing, peace and tranquillity took over.