

Crex Crex

A STRONG WESTERLY WIND, chilled by the Atlantic, blows a smirr of rain straight at the windows and shivers the foxgloves in the hotel garden. So much for June. But there are small consolations: a coal fire blazes in the hearth and I'm sinking into a velvet-covered chair. I feel calmer than I have for weeks. A young waiter with a Highland accent takes my order. He's bearded and his fingers are long and sensitive; he reminds me of my first boyfriend, who played guitar and thought he was going to make the world a better place, until he discovered how difficult that would be.

The waiter is polite and efficient and brings me a pot of Lady Grey and a scone the size of a saucer, sugar glittering on top like broken glass. I sip my tea and savour the heat from the glowing embers. Bliss. Then my husband appears and my good mood evaporates.

When we were first married I took such pride in saying those words: 'my husband'. Now it's more like a term of abuse. Here he comes, lumbering in wearing multi-pocketed trousers and a tatty anorak the colour of boiled spinach. And yes, he has his camera round his neck and a bag of lenses, weighing at least a stone, slung over his shoulder. Perhaps he thinks he'll spot a rare bird in the dining room. David is obsessed with what he calls his List: a catalogue of all known resident and visitor birds in Britain. Every spare second is devoted to looking for birds, the rarer the

better, but it's just a game to him, he's not remotely interested in the birds themselves. He even assigns them points – fifty for a great northern diver, sixty for a red-breasted merganser, that sort of thing. A hundred points is the highest score and it goes to the corncrake. But don't get me started on those sodding birds. *Crex crex*. *Crex crex*. Everywhere we go we hear them calling, or I should say rasping. The sound is harsh and repetitive: less like birdsong, more like the cranking of a rusty car jack.

David sits down opposite me. 'That looks nice,' he says, gesturing at my scone.

'It is.'

'Then I'll get one too.' His tone is jovial but I push my plate towards him.

'Here, finish this. I've had enough.'

I get up and leave. I know I'm behaving badly but I can't stop myself.

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It's our first time on Iona. We arrived three days ago, after a four-hour drive from Edinburgh, a ferry to Mull, another hour's drive, and finally a ten-minute ferry crossing. It would be quicker to get to Africa. Iona is tiny: four miles long and a mile wide, with one village, *Baile Mòr*, or 'Big Village', where our hotel is. Apart from the village, there's a smattering of other buildings, including the abbey with its sturdy square tower, and the ruins of a nunnery. A patchwork of green fields, rocks pushing through the thin soil, are dotted with sheep, and a few sandy beaches scallop the edge of the island. No cars are allowed, although the locals have them and it's remarkable how often I have to jump off the single-track road to get out of the way of a speeding Land Rover.

I walk out of the hotel and decide to head for the abbey to escape the rain. Outside its main door is a huge stone cross, three metres tall and beautifully carved. I think about all the hands that have touched it, all the changes it has witnessed.

David read up about Iona's history before we left; he hates going anywhere he hasn't meticulously researched first, so I know that this cross is over a thousand years old. Whatever storms raged in the hearts of the people who built it mean nothing to us now. Just as the storm raging in mine is without significance for anyone but me.

I go inside the abbey. I'd forgotten that feeling you get inside old churches. This one feels *really* old – the stones are grey and worn, and it smells of earth and dust. At secondary school my best friend was Catholic and sometimes I went to church with her; I even took communion because I didn't know any better. It made me feel important to think God was watching me and listening to my private thoughts. Empty-headed little girl that I was. I'm just as empty-headed now, when I'm forty-nine and should know better.

I go through a side door to the cloisters where an elderly man in tweed is making agonisingly slow progress. He's tall but stooped, with a kind face and the shaggiest eyebrows I've ever seen. His whole body is trembling, his feet almost beyond his control, each step requiring concentration and effort. Every time he reaches a pillar he clings to it as if it's his long lost brother, and when he holds on he stops trembling. He sits down on a low ledge between the pillars.

He sees me and smiles. 'Here on holiday?'

'You could say that. My husband's a twitcher.'

'Ah! He must be thrilled by the corncrakes.'

'He hasn't seen one yet.'

'They're very shy, but they're wonderful birds. I usually manage a glimpse. But they'll be off to the Congo in a couple of months.'

'The Congo? Why come to Iona when you spend the rest of the year basking in central Africa?'

'Birds are full of mysteries, but I expect it makes sense to them. And we're here, aren't we? When we could be somewhere warm!'

'Perhaps the male corncrakes like it and insist their wives come too.'

'Maybe,' he chuckles. 'But my wife was just as keen on Iona as I am. She's long dead now, God rest her soul, but I still come every year.'

'Like the corncrakes.'

'Exactly so!' He seems delighted with the comparison. 'They're really quite astounding in many ways, but they're not terribly good at getting off the ground. Rumour has it that on the night they leave, they all clamber to the top of the abbey tower and launch themselves from the roof. Once they're airborne they're away! Brave little creatures.'

I'm not sure I believe him, but I like the thought of the birds finding the miracle of flight from the abbey roof.

'When I was young,' he continues, 'this country was crawling with life. Millions of sparrows, lapwings, butterflies, hares - I still remember how it sounded, all that life. You used to hear corncrakes all over Britain, but they've been decimated by nothing more than the pattern a combine harvester makes in a field.'

'What do you mean?' I ask politely, sensing I've got him onto a favourite topic.

'It's very simple. The farmer starts at the edge of the field, and spirals in towards the centre.' He waves a hand in the air to demonstrate. 'The corncrakes and their chicks get trapped in the middle, and eventually crushed.'

'How horrible.' I can't think what else to say.

Right on cue a corncrake calls nearby.

'All that's required for their future survival is for the farmer to make a different pattern - work from the centre outwards, and give the birds a chance to run towards cover.'

The corncrake is still calling, and it's as loud as if it was in the cloisters with us.

'They have the strangest call,' I say. 'I've never heard anything like it.'

'The females don't call, it's a male you can hear. You can hear them up to a mile away.'

'I can believe it,' I say. 'I hear them every night from my hotel bedroom.'

He laughs. 'I believe crofters used to throw things at them from their window in desperation. But these days it's a privilege to hear them. Perhaps you'll even miss them when you're back home.'

'Maybe.' I smile. My thoughts turn to home and I shudder.

He struggles to his feet. I offer my arm but he refuses. Eventually he stands, but he seems unwilling to begin the effortful walk out of the abbey.

'Can I be of any assistance?' I ask. He seems so vulnerable, I'm worried about leaving him.

'No, but thank you. I'll be fine. Just a little slower these days.' He starts to jingle a few coins in his pocket, and I realise he'd probably rather not have an audience.

I thank him for telling me about the corncrakes and say goodbye. On my way back to the hotel I pass fields of sheep, all munching, heedless of the constant drizzle. The ewes have dull, pleasant faces, but the lambs are big and stocky, more like muscular teenage boys than cute babies. They butt each other and show their strength, little suspecting what it's all for. 'Keep eating, boys,' I say.

A large group of people approach, evidently just off the ferry for a day trip. They're talking loudly and snapping away with long-lensed cameras and smart phones. It must be obvious to the islanders who the tourists are: like migrating birds we arrive in spring and summer, huge flocks of us in our plumage of Gore-Tex and walking boots, full of chatter about beauty and remoteness.

'Isn't it tranquil!' they exclaim to each other.

When they've gone past, I stop to re-tie my bootlace, then peer over a low stone wall into a boggy meadow. A medium-sized, rather nondescript brown bird looks up at me, startled. Its eyes shine like beads of polished jet. It dashes into a clump of reeds.

A corncrake.

The bird itself was nothing special, but when it fixed its eyes on me, just for a second, it was like there was a connection between its consciousness and mine. A reminder that we share the same fabric of the world.

When I get back to the hotel room, David is sitting on the window seat reading a biography of St Columba. I say hello as if nothing happened earlier, as if abandoning him to my scone and pot of tea was perfectly normal behaviour. I think he's grateful for the pretence, he'll do anything to avoid confrontation. I decide to keep seeing the corncrake my secret.

'I'm going to have a shower before dinner – or do you want to go first?' I ask.

'No, that's fine. You go ahead.' He gives me a small smile. I almost feel sorry for him.

'I met an interesting man today,' I say. 'An elderly chap in tweed with shaggy white eyebrows. He told me about corncrakes.'

'I bet it was Sir Godfrey Lyttelton.' David sounds excited. 'He spends every summer here – he was a military man but now he's a renowned ornithologist. I've got one of his books somewhere. He's the one who discovered that the male corncrake can call up to 20,000 times a night.'

I can never tell David anything he doesn't already know.

At dinner that evening the same dark-haired waiter is working. He's handsome - perhaps I could have an affair too. But the truth is I wouldn't know how to go about having one. The waiter barely looks at me. He doesn't know how my body aches to be touched again, or that I was proposed to by three men in less than a year when I was twenty. I don't know when men stopped noticing me, it must have been a gradual thing. I still look at them, but often I feel more maternal than anything else for the younger ones. How depressing. As for middle-aged men, well, they don't really interest me. I've already got one of those.

In the restaurant it's mostly couples, and one or two families with bored teenagers. David orders venison. The dense, dark meat has never agreed with me. I think of those bullying muscular sheep in the fields and ask for a rack of lamb.

The evening seems endless; it doesn't get dark here until eleven. We sit in the hotel lounge and read. Or more precisely, David reads and I brood. Later, he chats to some of the other guests. People always like him – he's easy to talk to, he knows the right things to say. A middle-aged Glaswegian couple are complaining about the weather.

'And they talk about that global warming!'

'Global warming doesn't mean we get a nice Mediterranean climate,' I say. 'The effects of climate change are unpredictable – overall there's a warming effect, but it's also likely to mean more storms, more wind, more rain. It doesn't mean you can start planting vineyards and wearing your bikini in Troon.'

The conversation goes a bit flat after my contribution. I do my best, but I'm awkward, I know it. I can't do small talk, I always take the conversation too seriously.

I decide to go up to bed for a rare moment of peace and privacy. Heaven knows it's hard to get much privacy in a marriage. I get into my pyjamas and try to read but my eyes slip over the words, so I turn out the light and listen to the corncrakes calling from the nearby meadows. When David comes to bed I keep well over to my side. I lie on the soft cotton sheet framing questions I don't want him to answer. *Do you still love her? Do you still love me? Do you miss her? Are you sorry it's over?* Even when I'm lying still I feel jittery, as if I'm pacing inside my own skin. All night the corncrakes keep me company. *Crex crex, crex crex.*

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The next day we take the ferry back over to Mull so we can join a wildlife expedition. Mull seems huge compared to Iona, I've acclimatised already. The road skirts the scree-covered mountains and dozens of waterfalls come cascading down in milky streams. It's so different from the flat greenness of Iona.

At the meeting point sixteen of us cram onto the minibus and after brief introductions we're on the road, or rather we're on Mull's endless loop of single track road. It's not raining yet but the sky is roiling with black clouds.

'Right folks, what do you want to see today?' asks Nigel, our guide.

'The Big Five,' someone calls out and I laugh.

'Don't laugh,' Nigel says to me. 'Scotland has a very special Big Five of her own. It might not be elephants and lions, but what does she have, folks?'

People call things out – it's like being at school. It turns out Scotland's Big Five consists of otters, red squirrels, red deer, harbour seals and golden eagles.

'We might see any of the Big Five today,' Nigel tells us. 'And we'll probably see a white-tailed eagle too, there are plenty of them around at the moment.'

Everyone oohs and ahs. After a mile or so Nigel swings the bus down a bumpy track and parks in a layby. He sets up two large spotting scopes on stands, though almost everyone has their own expensive-looking binoculars. I have David's second-best pair which still cost £200.

Nigel brings out his own binoculars. They're Swarovski and he looks nervous when anyone gets too close.

'Nice equipment, Nige,' someone quips. 'You win the lottery?'

We stand around while Nigel tells us that he saw two white-tailed eagles here last week and that the conditions are perfect for seeing them again. I shiver and wonder when he'll pass round the coffee and cake that were advertised on his website. We don't see any birds except a couple of gulls gliding overhead, probably on the look-out for cake too, and after twenty minutes we get back on the bus.

'Saw an otter at this spot last week,' Nigel tells us, pulling up on a verge beside a strip of sandy beach. 'Got to be nice and quiet for otters.' Needless to say everyone is chattering and rustling packets of boiled sweets. A pied wagtail makes his brisk little run across the sand, tail tap-tapping like a clockwork toy.

Most of the group seem to be from Hampshire or Surrey, but they travel to Scotland every year looking for birds. The men are essentially all my husband – they have big cameras, big binoculars, and they talk of nothing but their Lists.

‘Last I year I ticked a red-necked phalarope,’ one of them says to David, who nods, evidently impressed.

‘Was that in Shetland?’ David asks. ‘We’re going there next year.’

News to me.

Another man asks David where we’re staying. When he says Iona, the man instantly says, ‘Oh, you must have seen a corncrake then.’

‘We’ve heard plenty,’ David says, unwilling to admit failure.

‘Oh dear, they’re shy bastards,’ says the man, seeing through his hedging reply.

I smile to myself.

There’s a Northern Irish girl here with her mum, and they’re clearly not birders; in fact they don’t seem to know anything at all about the natural world. Every bird we see the girl exclaims, ‘Amaaaazing!’ She asks what the big mottled birds are that we see beside the seagulls, and our guide tells her they’re juvenile herring gulls. ‘Amaaaazing!’ she says.

Later, when we’re eating our packed lunches, we talk about other holidays we’ve been on.

‘Last year we went to Australia,’ the Northern Irish girl says. ‘We bungee-jumped and did a skydive from a plane. It was amaaazing!’

I lean towards David and whisper, ‘Her vocabulary is rather limited,’ but he turns away.

‘Have you ever bungee-jumped?’

I realise with a shock that the girl is addressing her question to me.

‘Er, no. I haven’t.’ I try to convey some of the contempt I feel for this particular activity. I don’t need to dangle over a ravine to know I’m alive, thanks.

‘You should try it, it’s-’

'Yes, I'm sure it's amazing,' I snap.

She gapes at me, then turns away.

And this is how the rest of the afternoon proceeds. At regular intervals we get out and stand in a layby, point our binoculars at a distant blob that Nigel thinks might be something hunched on a branch, but which turns out to be nothing, and then we pile back into the bus. We stop at 'toilets' which means stopping near a wood so we can go behind the trees if we need to. I decide I can hold on.

There's much discussion about which birding apps people use. John from Brighton admits to using Merlin which appears to be a faux pas - it's for novices. Nigel prefers BirdsEye though it's not for beginners, as he tells shame-faced beginner John. 'You need to already know what you're looking at.'

'What's the point of it then?' I ask. 'Why do you need an app if you already know what you're seeing?'

'You use it to tick off the birds on your list,' he says. Obviously. Silly me. 'And it'll bring up all the birds you've not ticked yet, so you can see what you've got left, and it can divide your list up – World List, Regional List – it's brilliant.'

'Sounds it.'

David and I hardly speak for the entire expedition. The rain holds off and we see two golden eagles soaring above a pine forest. David is happy, he can tick those off. When we say goodbye to everyone at the end of the afternoon Nigel pats me on the shoulder.

'Take care, love. Hope you're feeling better soon.'

In the car I ask David if he knows what that was about.

'I told Nigel you were ill, to excuse your behaviour.'

'You did what?'

'You were embarrassing. What did you have to be so rude to Rebecca for?'

'Who's Rebecca?'

'The Northern Irish girl. And you were rude to Nigel. You were rude to everyone in fact. As usual.'

We're silent for the rest of the drive across Mull. It takes forever as David pulls into a passing place whenever there's a car remotely in view on the horizon, and allows speeding drivers to overtake us at every opportunity. When I met him I was fascinated by what a careful, patient driver he was. He was the only man I knew who didn't get angry when other drivers cut in front of him or ignored his right of way. Now his patience frustrates me, he seems slow and stupid. Why doesn't he care that these other drivers are rude and dangerous? I'm irritated by his big hands on the steering wheel, his bitten nails, the hole in his jumper at the elbow, his woolly hat knitted by his mother. How can the things that once filled you with tenderness fill you with rage?

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The next morning is dreich again. David goes out alone, corncrake spotting. Their calls, which thrilled him at first, have become a source of irritation – he thinks they're taunting him. Later I go out too, dressed to the nines in waterproof trousers and an anorak. We're leaving Iona tomorrow and there are still places I haven't explored. I head north first, stopping briefly at the village shop for a packet of ginger biscuits, before squelching to the top of Dun I. This is Iona's only hill, and it's just a few hundred feet high. The rain suddenly eases and the sun peers out between fast-moving clouds. To the east I can see Mull, its pink granite cliffs a blur in the low clouds. I know Staffa is to the north and the islands of Coll and Tiree are to the north-west, but I can't see them in this weather.

I open the biscuits and mechanically stuff them into my mouth, trying not to think about calories. I try not to think about a lot of things. Instead I look at the sea, the sky, the light – they never stop changing. I hear a droning: a helicopter is leaving the island, swaying like an injured insect. Then it steadies and zooms out of sight.

I decide to visit a beach to the west. I cross a deserted scruffy golf course and half jump, half step into a wide shallow burn to get there, but it's worth the wet feet.

The beach is covered in birds that lift off as I approach – redshanks and ringed plovers mostly, and a dozen stocky oyster catchers calling *pee-peep!* in boisterous indignation at the disturbance. Further out to sea there's a group of shags on a rock, their black wings held out to dry; they look like vampires preparing to embrace their next fishy victim.

Seaweed is strewn across the beach in green and brown streamers, and every rock pool is rosetted with limpets. I sit on an outcrop to take the weight off my feet and dip my hand into the cool, clear water. My walking boots are rubbing now that my feet are wet – the boots are new and I didn't break them in properly. David told me to wear them round the house with two pairs of socks but I forgot. His walking boots are old and battered – I bet they're comfortable. Still, the pain is something to focus on. After all, Iona is a pilgrimage destination and pilgrims sometimes walk with bare feet, or deliberately put a stone in their shoe. There's nothing like pain to focus the mind, or at least to clear it of everything else.

I don't see David at any point which is odd, until I realise he's probably avoiding me. Maybe he took the boat over to Mull for the day again. Maybe he's gone home without me. My heart freezes over at the thought. Marriage is like an island where there are only two natives. Other people can never be more than visitors; they don't understand the history, the customs, the complicated codes of behaviour. There's endless potential for hurting each other. I can't bear to think he'll never be my sweetheart, my true love, again. But perhaps he hasn't been those things for a long time.

When I get back to our room I sit on the bed and remove my boots. The bathroom door is shut and the shower's running. I feel such relief: he hasn't left me after all. Peeling my socks off is agony. My big toes are rubbed raw and my heels are bloody where the blisters have torn.

'Ouch,' is David's only comment when he comes out of the bathroom and sees my feet, but mingled with the 'I told you so' tone is a note of sympathy. Perhaps marriages have been saved by less. I am something like glad to see him.

That night at dinner we make conversation about normal things – his continued failure to see a corncrake (I keep my secret), his job, my job, friends we'll catch up with when we're back. We sit in the lounge afterwards and have a drink.

The hotel manager is doing her rounds, greeting people and apologising for the weather. I ask her about the helicopter I saw leaving Iona earlier.

'It was taking Sir Godfrey Lyttelton to Glasgow, he took a fall. Such a shame, he's a lovely gent. He's often in here in the evenings for a wee natter.'

'Will he be okay?' I ask.

'Oh yes. He lost his footing and broke his hip, but he's stable now.'

But I won't see him again. I won't be able to tell him I saw a corncrake. 'Will he come back to Iona this year, do you think?'

David gives me a 'Why do you want to know?' look.

'No, don't think he'll be returning at all. He needs looking after and there's no one to do that for him here. His nearest relative's his nephew in London, so I expect he'll go into a nursing home on the mainland. Sir Godfrey's been saying for years his nephew will put him in a home; seems he was right.'

'But he won't see the corncrakes again!' I say.

She looks puzzled and moves off to talk to other guests. David asks me why I'm so upset about Sir Godfrey, but I don't even know myself.

§

The last day. We packed most of our things last night and will be getting the boat to Mull after breakfast. Part of me is looking forward to getting home – being in my own house, walking around Edinburgh, opening the bedroom curtains and seeing the early morning light on the creamy stone buildings. Another part of me is dreading it. I wonder if I should suggest marriage counselling.

David's in the bathroom, but the door is ajar and I can see him shaving at the sink. Since last night things have been a tiny bit better between us, something of the

old us is re-emerging and I feel hopeful. I hum as I open a jar of face moisturiser and smooth it over my skin. David appears at the bathroom door.

‘I think we should have a trial separation when we get back,’ he says. ‘I’ll move out, you can stay in the house.’

‘Okay,’ I say, and turn back to the mirror, my heart pounding against my ribcage. There are smears of white moisturising cream on my nose and chin. With the delicatest possible touch, as if my skin is made of cobwebs, I rub them away.

He goes back to shaving. I can see from here how his sandy hair is thinning and I feel an urge to go over to him and stroke where his scalp is showing. Suddenly I remember that ache you get from love. It has returned: at a low-wattage, but there.

‘But what if we separate and one of us gets ill? Or has a fall?’ I call to him.

‘What?’ He steps back into the bedroom looking amazed, as though the way my mind works is one of the greatest mysteries of the world.

‘Who would look after me then? Who would look after you?’

I run out of our room and go outside, down to the little beach. A few waders are on the sand, running in and out with the ebb of waves. If only we could touch the earth as lightly as they do. There’s fragility everywhere I look. In the little wooden boats I see bobbing near sharp rocks. In birds’ eggs, bracken tenderly tucked around them, futile against predator and storm. In the slender foxgloves battered by the wind, and most of all in us, in our brittle bones ready to shatter and our treacherous blood ready to spill at the slightest knock.

I watch the rain falling into the grey sea and listen to the corncrakes. Soon they will make their way to the abbey tower, launch themselves into the air, and make their unlikely flight to Africa. Meanwhile they’re still asking their own unknowable questions. *Crex crex, crex crex, crex crex, crex crex.*