
The Broken Circle

RACHEL SPENCE CHISHOLM



Leaving



Sunlight struggled to filter through the clustered clouds. Choked back, its warmth failed to reach out to touch those assembled. Heads bowed, their eyes closed in prayer, all listened as the final words entered the stillness, escaped with the gentle breeze, to echo then fade to the silence beyond.

Quietness cloaked the group as each remembered Colin. Collected memories united them in their sense of loss, of shared pain and deep sadness. Tears gathered, seeping unchecked over weather-beaten cheeks, as the grave was filled. Each man in turn, the custom of the island, helped to cover the coffin from the pile of earth nearby, as the women stood and observed, witnessing the final burial, arms linked, hands clasped together, bonded in death as in life, true communion to the end, as in the beginning.

A carpet of flowers was laid, and then opened for all to see. So many flowers, so many memories. To see them brought comfort to the little group given their own space, a place apart, the immediate family only. Their flowers were the last to be laid, a shared bouquet, each flower a symbol of the times past, from childhood to adulthood, of their beloved Colin.

Angus walked towards them, caught Flora's nod of approval, and then filled his pipe bag with air. Within moments every pair of eyes focused on him, resplendent in his full regalia. The air was expectant as, his tuning complete, he prepared to play. The sound of the schottische lit faces into smiles and released tension into the air. A wave of gurgling laughter rippled through the assembled, as Colin had the last laugh, as usual.

"Trust Colin! We didn't get to dance at his wedding, but he obviously wants us to dance at his funeral. What a man!" The sentiments expressed by Findlay were acknowledged by one and all. Flora led the clapping in time to Angus's playing while feet began to tap along to the resounding rhythm.

"This is your applause for having such a grand life!" Murdo quipped with a rueful smile, then unexpectedly wiped away a tear, something he'd never been known to do.

Flora nodded to Angus to continue playing as she led the family to the gate and away to the hotel for the customary farewell. Drams were passed around as the emptying of the cemetery began. Before long the last car but one had departed.

Donald closed the gate and walked along the gravel path. He stopped in front of the grave, dropped to his knees and reached to his throat. His hand tore at the buttons of his collar, which fell to the ground to lie in a broken circle, stiff and unyielding above the gentle blades of grass. Words exploded the silence.

"Why God? Why?" His head crumpled forward as the avalanche of emotion was at last able to be released.

Remembering

Donald watched with admiration as Colin swept round the floor with his wife Meg. He had two left feet when it came to anything more than a St. Bernard's. Meg was enjoying herself thoroughly, but then she always did when Colin was around. There was a sparkle about him that made him popular with everyone. He had to admit that he liked being with him himself. A feeling of unease touched him, as it tended to do these days when he found himself thinking of Colin. He shrugged and smiled, releasing the feeling to that place inside himself that needed to be locked. Applause resounded through the overcrowded hall as dancers left the floor to rejoin others seated or standing, anticipating the cup of tea that was now on its way round the assembly.

Tea, island-style, was always a highlight of any ceilidh. It was a very special brew that only a few of the island ladies could measure exactly, not too strong, but certainly not weak enough to miss the good taste of the relatively uncontaminated water. The water was good just now; Neill hadn't been up to the reservoir to check the chloride levels for months. It was clear and unpolluted by man's interference and that was how they all liked it.

Two of the men circled the floor, kettles to hand, milk and sugar or just milk, their offering to each who had been given a cup from a basket that had seen better days. Donald favoured his tea with milk and helped himself to a piece of clootie dumpling that was doing the rounds as well.

Fed and watered, the cups cleared to the kitchen, it was time for a poem from Shona. A ceilidh was never complete without the traditional verses recited from this gentle lady's lips. A respectful silence awaited her entrance to the tiny stage, as she unfolded the familiar piece of paper. Laughter greeted her rendition as it always would. Her story never aged or faded and retained a freshness like her good self. Huge applause greeted the final punchline and there were calls for more; calls that rose to a crescendo as the second well-worn gem emerged from her cardigan pocket. A true performer, she waited until the audience quietened before delivering her encore. A second wave of applause swept her to her place in the circle, to let the dancing begin again. Colin reached over to his aunt and kissed her blushing cheek. "You haven't lost your touch Auntie. How long have you been telling those, fifty years?" He ducked low as her hand tried to deliver a playful cuff to his lug.

"My but you're cheeky our Colin, and me only forty last week!" Shona shone with pride as her nephew's hands pulled her gently to the floor.

"How about a dance cheek to cheek then? You can manage a wee St. Bernard's can't you, a fine young thing like yourself?" They joined the pairs already assembled, and bowed and curtsied flamboyantly as Duncan's box sounded the first chord.

"This is the last dance folks, then the party's at Colin's house tonight!" announced the accordionist with a twinkle in his eyes.

"That's news to me Duncan Ban! Who said I was having a party?" Colin challenged, his protests immediately drowned out by a sea of voices accepting the invitation offered.

The dance ended and folks drifted homewards. Meg called to her husband who

was brushing the floor.

“Darling, you go to the party this time, it’ll do you good to see the crowd and relax a bit.” Her words met with a nod of approval. Donald did want to go and knew that a few hours of magical company would lift his flagging spirits. Colin looked over and smiled.

“I’ll give you a lift Donald, but we’ll need to go now before the invasion beats us to it!”

“I’ll be right with you.” Donald smiled as he returned the brush to its place behind the kitchen door.

4

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART ONE THE ISLAND

Watching

Donald was always amazed at the way parties, island-style, were so different from parties anywhere else. Age was no barrier. From the youngest to the oldest resident, all came and enjoyed the crack.

Singing was always a common feature at such occasions, where there were invariably guitars, mouth organs and fiddles present to accompany participation by many. What a talented crew they were, most of them self-taught, although the new teacher was doing a good job in encouraging the next generation to read as well as play music. The musical tradition of the island certainly was in safe hands, although those living near the school on practice nights might have other opinions!

“How about Fagoil Liosmor Flora?” Colin encouraged his mum. Although she was his mother, everyone on the island called her Flora, Flora Duncan in fact, since Duncan was her father’s first name. When she’d been at school, her cousin shared the same name, Flora McLean, so to avoid mixing them up, one was known as Flora Beag (small) and the other as Flora Duncan. Even although Flora Beag had grown inches taller than her cousin, and had long since left the island to live on the mainland, the name had stuck, so Flora Duncan she would always be.

“Och! Away ye go Colin, I can’t sing!” Flora smiled and blushed.

“Sing it with me then, I’ll play along with my guitar,” he cajoled.

“Ow! All right then, if you insist,” she conceded, beaming all over her pretty face. Encouragement rose as gathering applause from those seated, kneeling and standing around the corners of the room. All turned towards mother and son to listen and join in with the much-loved chorus. Donald watched as the pair hushed the crowd with their beautifully blending voices. It was such a pleasure to see them together enjoying good times. Times had been so hard for them both recently, and Colin had borne the brunt of the trauma that had darkened their existence since Ross’s untimely death.

Applause greeted the end of the song as a crescendo of requests for another rose in the air. Colin immediately responded with one of his well-known get them all singing along numbers. He had a special way with people. They seemed to lose their shyness and inhibitions when he was a round. He made them believe in themselves.

Donald's thoughts made him question his own abilities with people. He was paid to try to make people listen to him, but folks listened to Colin because they wanted to.

Sometimes he wondered why on earth he felt called to be a minister.

His thoughts remained with Colin as his eyes circled the faces watching the performance. They were a mixed group of souls, an unlikely combination thrown together because of their being, within this tiny island community. Each had a reason for staying.

Peter stayed because this was the only place he'd known. He'd never set foot on the mainland in all of his lifetime of seventy years. He always claimed that he'd never had the need to leave. He'd been born here and he'd be laid to rest here. He certainly looked well on his lifestyle; grey hair still tinged with the darkness of his youth; a
5

robust frame that could still walk the legs off many a younger person, as he gathered the sheep on his croft with his trusted Meg by his side.

Andrew was an incomer, a painter to trade. With his wife Grace and their two small children, he'd taken over one of the vacant farm cottages, brought life to its neglected garden, and seemed set to stay, bringing their much needed enthusiasm to other young couples on the island. They hadn't faced a winter yet, and that was the biggest test for all would-be islanders. Their two children were a welcome increase to the school roll, which tended to rise and fall from the two or three of a couple of years ago to a much healthier twelve at present.

Donald often wondered what had led Colin back to island life. He'd been home now for four out of the last five years and didn't seem to be considering a departure, in fact he gave every indication of being set here for life. Donald shivered as he remembered seeing the vacant look in Colin's eyes as he spoke of the future. Those same eyes appeared in front of him now, the message in their depths well hidden.

"You're miles away Donald Ban, a penny for them?" Colin's voice interrupted the thoughts and brought a reassuring smile to Donald's face.

"Oh, sorry Colin, thinking ofvacancy," he answered truthfully.

"You're not still considering that new charge in Wick? It's a mighty bleak part of the world up there. You'd need a lot of spirit to keep the warmth in your soul in a draughty old corner like that! How about a dram?" Colin's attempt at humour lifted the sadness from Donald's mind, and he accepted the top-up to his glass with thanks.

“I’ll bet you were looking for inspiration for Sunday’s sermon. Every time you take a service here, something funny happens. I remember hearing about the last time when you were accidentally locked in the church by the laird’s son. Talk about a captive audience! It’s almost worth coming to church to see what you dream up this time!”

“Why not come then?” said Donald invitingly, but sensing the inevitable response before it was made. He mouthed the words as Colin spoke them.

“The roof’d fall in if I came to church!”

“It was worth a try!” Donald nodded and laughed.

Colin moved off replenishing glasses as he went on his way. Donald still couldn’t discover what had led his friend to be absenting himself from church. It had coincided with his return to the island. He wouldn’t be drawn on it, even by his mother Flora who was a regular churchgoer. In time perhaps he’d return, but things couldn’t be forced, as Donald knew to his cost. The rejection of faith was often a mystery even to the one doing the rejecting.

6

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART ONE THE ISLAND

The morning after

Kirsty rose from her knees wiping the final traces of dust from the hearth with her fire cloth. She always felt better when the fire had been set, clearing out the ashes of yesterday to prepare a place for new light and warmth to flicker into another day. This was her much-treasured quiet time. As she knelt repeating actions that had no longer any need for thought, she cast her mind over the happenings of the day before, giving thanks to God for the many blessings that were hers.

Ash-bucket in hand, carefully covered by a weighty piece of newspaper, should a lurking whip of wind seek to make her up for the day, she opened her kitchen door and was paused as ever to wonder at the view out of her window. Sunlight spread ripples of glistening light over the calmest of seas, as its rays rose silently, allowing its curved core to emerge from behind the shelter of island peaks, radiating warmth and life and a feeling that all was right with the world today. Kirsty loved the sun. Sunny days always lifted her spirits, made her want to dance and skip and sing, be like a child again. A song from her heart opened her voice to the day as she continued on her way out of the back door to empty the ashes.

The peacefulness of the early morning stilled her song. No one was about. No doubt her neighbours had been at the party last night and were sleeping off the effects. Granted it was still only half past seven, but that wasn’t early to Kirsty. She was always up at six, winter and summer alike. Early to bed and early to rise was her way, a habit passed from her days as a crofter’s wife. You had to make the most of

the day's light when there were hens to feed, eggs to collect, cows to milk, baking to be done and a hungry family to feed.

Neillie'd never let any of them have a long lie, not even on a Sunday, in fact most especially not on a Sunday.

So much had to be done on the Sabbath before going to the Kirk. All four children had to be scrubbed clean, dressed in their best, and walked the three miles in time for the mid-day service. Then it was back home to change out of their finery into old clothes for the best hours of the week. This was their together time, a family time during which they could play and enjoy one another's company. No work was allowed, all the chores had to be done on a Saturday. Even the cooking was prepared to be eaten cold, as a picnic lunch or tea. Kirsty's smile broadened as she thought of those together days. She couldn't remember any rain or cross words; all her memories were of warm sunshine and happiness.

The smile already on her face widened, and encouraged the laughter lines at the corners of her eyes to cease to their usual depths, as she saw her neighbour Seamus emerge from his back door with his dog Misty. Kirsty didn't imagine that their usual walk would be of any length today. Seamus looked a wee bit hung over; his hair tousled; face rather grey; the inevitable cigarette clutched between the fingers of his right hand. She filled her lungs and called a lusty good morning to him. His hand immediately covered his forehead as the piercing sound reverberated through his cranium.

7

“Morning Kirsty,” his voice whispered back, as his legs involuntarily began to move him towards the source of this most recent discomfort. Kirsty lowered her voice a little as Seamus came towards her.

“It must have been a good party. I heard you coming back after five. It's a wonder you're able to stand after so little sleep. You didn't end up in the ditch then?” she questioned him mischievously, “I heard that a certain car did have an unfortunate altercation with old Geaspar's bull at the black gate, and the car came off worst ending up in the ditch!”

“Nothing gets past you Kirsty,” Seamus grinned, “you're the eyes and ears of this island!” Kirsty returned his grin with one of her own.

“I'm just going to make a pot of tea. How about sharing it with me? I might even make you some bacon and eggs to go with it!” she invited wickedly. Seamus cringed. “I'll pass on the breakfast, but I could murder a cup of your special tea Kirsty. A hair of the dog might improve my spirits good style!”

He knew that the special tea would encourage him to loosen his tongue and tell her all about the party of the night before. Kirsty went in ahead of him. She knew whose

car had gone into the ditch, but she didn't know who had been in it at the time. She'd soon find out.

8

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART ONE THE ISLAND

Meetings

Donald's eyes lifted from the stillness of the water to the distant hills, softly edged in mist as the watery sun began to weep through the bleariness of a new autumn morning. Silent tears escaped and trickled down his face, surprising him with their sadness. His mind cast back, seeking out a memory that he knew had been well hidden, awake only in his subconscious where it presented itself in dreams that couldn't be recalled on wakening. His face clouded, lines of pain etched in furrowed brows. Why could he never be free of this invasion of sadness?

The sound of Lachie's car drew his thoughts back to reality. He couldn't see it, but he could hear its distinctive sound. Silencers weren't a requirement on an island car, at least not until Sandy stepped off the ferry. The rhythmic spluttering increased in volume until, all at once, it shuddered to a halt. The ageing maestro had arrived.

"Good morning Lachie!" Donald enthused as he approached both maestros.

"How are you today? I see you're still waiting for parts from the mainland!"

"I am that. It's been three months now and they still can't silence me! It wouldn't be right anyway if I was silenced. No-one would hear my comings and goings, would they now?" Lachie grinned. He was a wizard with everyone's car but his own.

"How are you yourself?" Lachie challenged. "I hear you had a bit of a night at Colin's!"

Donald smiled. The island grapevine was certainly in good working order today. "I did indeed," admitted Donald, "It was good to see everyone in such good form. Pity about Hughie's car though!" Lachie's eyes lit up, before he quickly shielded their glow. Donald smiled as he realized that news of last night's ditching hadn't reached Lachie yet.

"It was a shame, and his car only here a month. Where exactly did it happen?"

Lachie enquired attempting to cover up, his lack of knowledge there for Donald to see and enjoy for once. Donald thought long and hard before answering, his eyes twinkling mischievously. Should he offer the truth or begin a little wind-up, after all he'd been the butt of many a wind-up at Lachie's hands before. He decided on a measure of both.

"I'm sure I don't know where it happened, but it was lucky that Ian Ban was driving. He's an expert at roll-overs!" Lachie's eyes flashed into life. His mind raced as he thought of what might actually have happened. He swung open his car door and launched himself out of his seat. There would be discussions about this in the

pub before long and that was a certainty.

“Come on Donald, let’s get this shop open for business!” he exclaimed as he moved jauntily towards the only shop of the island. Donald followed grinning from ear to ear. ‘Only here,’ he thought to himself, ‘do folks care enough to gossip as they do!’

A collection of cars was now en route to the same stopping point. The community meeting place where not only goods were bought and sold.

9

One shop, one island, one people. The shop had moved about in its time, but over recent years remained here, close to the pier, handy for last minute odds and ends, and the place to collect waiting post, watermail and pigeon alike. You could buy anything from a needle to an exhaust bandage, though the latter tended to gather dust and lose its adhesive power, given the permissiveness to noise pollution that prevailed.

The shop was stocked to the gunwhales, and then some, its back store cascading with supplies of essentials that could be quickly diminished if a boat or two were missed. Everything sold in the shop had to be ferried there from the mainland, although some local produce was sold seasonally. This made goods expensive, freight charges being what they were, and it was understandable that many folks had groceries sent directly from mainland stores. Everyone did use the shop though, for its value and service was an essential part of the continued viability of life in such a remote location.

The shop had suddenly become busy as Donald and Lachie made their way into its hub. It was boat day, with the usual rush to get posting done and on its way overseas. First class post was not always possible to or from the island. Mail came and went three times weekly and would only be delivered following the ferry’s arrival at port. It took a bit of getting used to, but certainly helped to slow the pace of life from ratrace to islandpace. New technology in the form of fax and e-mail had obviously helped, but islanders preferred real mail to remain their island reality.

Kirsty was holding the floor. She and Lachie were exchanging notes about the party and ditching of the night before. Everyone who was in the shop added his or her own detail to the event, which had now grown in proportion. Donald looked deadpan. He’d done enough in whetting Lachie’s interest; the rest was now being produced in true island fashion. He left with a, “Cheeri folks!” and made his way back to the manse. He’d no doubt hear the full scripted piece later that day as he made his ‘official’ visits.

Visits were not obligatory, but he loved to make them, and feel once again the warmth and caring that was so much a part of life in this magical place. He knew

who needed a visit today and reached for his dog collar. Some folks were put off by it and what it signified, but on this particular occasion, it was necessary. Some of the older inhabitants needed to see the official ness of it so that there could be a distinction between Donald, the boy they'd seen grow into a man, and the minister, the man of God whose faith shone in his eyes and words.

Old Ella needed her minister today to read and pray with, to listen and hear about the faith that seemed to be deserting her. She hadn't been to church for nearly a year and wouldn't discuss her absence with anyone. Maybe Donald could unlock the door and let her find a way back. Donald donned his sports jacket and inspected his appearance in the mirror before seeking out his wife for her approval.

“Will I do?” he asked as he kissed her gently.

“You’ll do minister!” she smiled encouragingly. He set off with a spring in his step.

Ella’s home was on the far side of the island, but he’d walk there. The time in the open would clear his mind and give him time to talk with God. By the time he reached Ella’s he’d be filled with stillness and be ready to listen and encourage her to

10

release her troubles into his confidence. He loved his work with people. It felt so right for him to be doing as he was, ministering to people in this way. The sun stretched his shadow behind him, warming him, filling every inch of his being. It was good to be alive.

11

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART ONE THE ISLAND

Live and Learn

“Cheerie Ella!” Donald closed the door of the little cottage and waved as he walked down the grassy pathway to the road. He turned and raised his arm again to greet the bright face smiling from the cottage window. Ella seemed happier after his visit. She’d got a few things off her chest and even indicated her intention to come along to church sometime before he disappeared back to the mainland. He breathed in, deeply satisfied. Yes he did like his job, especially on days like this.

It was nearly noon. The sun was overcoming clouds in an effort to flame the delightful autumn landscape. Tinged with rust and orange and deep burgundy, a carpet of flora and fauna spread before his admiring eyes. That distinctive autumn scent filled his senses and he almost skipped along the road in response to its overpowering glory. Deep breaths filled his lungs, encouraging the song in his heart to pour from his lips. He stopped himself with a momentary thought, ‘A skipping, singing minister? What would my mainland parishioners think if they saw me? Not very reverend like!` The thought evaporated behind him as he told himself that this

was his island home and he was Donald here. He skipped and sang on his way revelling in the freedom that was always to be found here.

Noises in the distance attracted his attention. It was lunchtime. The island children were outside burning off some energy after consuming one of Jean's delicious school dinners. He remembered them well; caramel shortcake with vermicelli sprinklings; mince, tatties and neeps; bramble crumble and custard. 'No-one on earth could make custard like Jean,' he thought wistfully. Slowing his skipping to a brisk walk, he watched the youngsters at play.

His thoughts returned to his own days at this very school. He wondered if they still jumped the fence and played at the burn. He and Colin were always there at break times, catching newts and minnows and watching the hovering dragonflies skilfully snap up their tiny insect prey. He laughed as he was reminded of the time they were jumping the burn at its widest and Colin fell in. The peaty mud sucked him into its softness and it had taken four of them to haul him out. He looked as if he'd been dipped in chocolate, and given the heat of the day; it was soon baked hard on him making it very difficult to walk. Miss hadn't had anything for him to change into, so he had to stand for the rest of the afternoon, carry his flaking camouflage home, and take all the witticisms thrown at him by peers and islanders alike. When he got home, poor Flora nearly died laughing as he danced and twirled in the spray of cold water that was hosed on him. He sang through it all screeching the tune of the 'peat fire flame', one of Flora's favourites, and dancing a schottische with incredible vigour.

From that day on his nickname of Flaky stuck. Even Miss occasionally referred to him as Flaky, with her usual unreadable face. You could never tell if she was cross or pleased, but once or twice you'd catch a glimpse of the sparkle in her eyes and know that she was laughing inside.

"Donald! Donald!" several voices took up the chant as the youngsters recognised the figure coming along the road towards them. In moments they were all charging 12

down the gravel path to greet him as he approached the school gate. Voices rose with questions in a discordant cacophony. Donald's voice rose above theirs with a repeated, "OK! OK!" The avalanche of sound subsided as he was ushered in through the gate and up to the kitchen door. A snowy white head popped out to see what the commotion was and exclaimed, "It's yourself Donald. We thought you might be in seeing as how you were at Ella's this morning." Her singsong voice, so like that of his mother's, brought a huge grin to his face.

"I thought I'd slip by, but I'm afraid I was spotted by these scallywags!" As if he could slip by, or indeed go anywhere without everyone knowing, the island telegraph

wouldn't allow that. Donald's grin grew bigger.

"Excuse me? What's a scallywag?" Cara's pretty little face looked puzzled as Donald looked down at the figure tugging his arm.

"Someone full of mischief just like you!" Donald exclaimed and was rewarded by Cara's look of complete understanding.

"I've a wee bit of custard and tart left if you've room after Ella's pancakes!" suggested Jean.

"I've always room for your custard Jean, even though I did eat rather a lot of Ella's pancakes." He patted his ample stomach. "I'll go home at least a stone heavier and none of my suits will fit me. It's just as well I'm only here for a couple of weeks!" He was always struggling with his weight and he guessed he always would. He loved his food, especially when made by his favourite second mother. Jean had been his mother's special friend, and had more or less brought him up after the early death of his mum Janet.

"Right lad, sit yourself down and I'll bring you the leftovers." Jean said as she bustled back into the kitchen to dish up an enormous plate of caramel tart and custard.

"I'll be in to see you in a wee while," Donald shooed the youngsters off with a promise, washed his hands, and sat down at the enormous solid wooden kitchen table that was scrubbed to a shine. He ate his pudding as Jean washed and tidied away.

How different this was to his own city parish; no children running to meet you; gates and railings to keep children in; door entry systems to negotiate before you could even see a child. Children on this island had such freedom. He'd had it himself. He sometimes wondered why he hadn't felt called to an island parish. Maybe if they'd had children, he and Meg, but that was not to be. In his heart he knew that an island parish wouldn't hold the same challenge for him. He loved his city parish, despite the many difficulties he found there.

Together with some very committed elders they'd turned their church into a much-needed

community centre that was open all hours, almost literally. The lights in the church for so much of the day spoke volumes to such an area of deprivation. Living was hard, especially with the scale of addiction that permeated. Alcohol and drugs numbed the pain of living for many, but wrought havoc amongst families and turned youngsters towards trouble of one sort or another. Unemployment was widespread. Vandalism and crime brought police officers daily to many streets in the district. His church was doing its bit to support, and it was having a measure of success, at least at the moment. They'd always believed that the moment was there

to be lived with, and not all of their moments of recent years had been good. Uphill always seemed to be the path they trod, but commitment was there to carry on, and carry on they would, despite the repeated setbacks. Yes he'd certainly taken on a challenge in his life, but he'd always had his eye on the mountain top, and was never happier than when he was enthusing others and taking new projects into being.

“More?” Jean’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Eh. No thanks m’ta,” Donald replied, but accepted the offer of a cup of tea. Jean joined him as they continued catching up on the latest about Hughie’s car and the events of the last weekend. They could have sat there all day. Time was like that on this island; it never passed in a hurry; it quite happily waited for you to meander on your way at the slowest of paces.

“Well Jeanma, I better go in and see these youngsters, or I’ll never hear the end of it!” Donald took his leave with a warm hug and kiss and walked through into the classroom area.

Scraping notes on a fiddle or four suggested that he was about to be pounced on and held captive for some time to come. John Bell, the enthusiastic new teacher, was instructing his pupils as Donald knocked and entered.

“About time too!” exclaimed John, pointing to the stool at the piano. Donald beamed and sat down, his fingers immediately sounding a couple of chords on the keys, before bursting into a medley of reels that had everyone clapping and keeping time with their feet. John tucked his fiddle under his chin and joined in.

Spontaneous dancing erupted, as pairs of children showed their newfound skill in a strip the willow. The music speeded up until the youngsters were unable to dance in time and collapsed in a heap in the middle of the floor. Much laughter ensued as the music finished with a flourish.

“You’ll soon be able to play like that!” said John to his group of smiling young faces. “But you’ll have to start practicing!”

“I think we’ll let them take things a wee bit slower to begin with though,” suggested Donald.

Together they led the small band of fiddles, recorders and an accordion through the music of one piece and then another. Donald watched the young teacher admiringly as he stopped and started, fine-tuning each note and phrase until they were playing in harmonious splendour. It wouldn’t be long until this wee band was playing at ceilidhs.

“Well done Mr. Bell,” said Donald, “You’re certainly keeping the music tradition of this island alive. Can we have a prayer to thank God for these lovely new fiddles?”

“I think there’ll be some parents who don’t share your sentiments!” laughed John.

“What are sentiments?” asked Cara, with her usual inquiring smile. Donald proceeded to explain as John led the others straight into a lovely Gaelic waltz.

Jean sang in the kitchen in her native Gaelic, remembering the favourite song that was hers and her husband’s. Her eyes focused on the tiny moving speck on the horizon. He was on time, as usual. The bus was on its way. School would soon be over for another day. She’d seen many a day in this wee school, but today was a bit special. It was good to see Donald so happy. There was a time when he’d been near to ending things, so deep was his depression. She shook off the frown that threatened

14

to appear and hung it up with her apron. No use looking back to sad times. He was in good form now and that was what counted.

15

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART ONE THE ISLAND

An Island Christening

It was ten thirty. Low water was at eleven. The crossing to the old chapel had begun. Tractors and trailers full of islanders had gathered. One or two landrovers and fourby-fours had already started the slow journey across. People on foot had reached the shallow receding water that held them on this side of the tidal sands. Others were just beginning to walk across, in small groups and pairs, sharing news and their excitement about the day. Soon the water would disappear, sucked out by the tide. Sand would appear, a safe crossing stretched out before them.

And so it began, a trail that stretched from shore to shore. They crossed slowly, respectful of the place and its hidden dangers; followed the tracks of those who’d gone ahead. Wrapped against the weather, they passed to the other side, gathered in the old chapel and waited.

Donald looked at the face of the baby he held in his arms and smiled.

“John.....Angus.....Hugh.....MacNeill, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” His voice continued with the well-known words of baptism, as he sprinkled the wee one’s forehead with water. Faces around smiled, some with tears threatening. They had all come; made their way to this special place to welcome this youngest member of their community into their family, into God’s family. Donald passed the infant to his mother. Her eyes shone with love as she hugged her baby son close. Tears rained down her pretty face as the emotion of the moment welled-up and overflowed. Little John MacNeill was passed from one doting relative to another. Not a whimper he made. Smiles dimpled his cheeks as he was passed from hand to hand. He was his father’s son right enough, a happy lad with a ready smile for everyone.

Donald swallowed hard as he watched. Tears gathered around his eyes and slid gently over his cheeks. His arm wrapped itself around Katie's shoulders. He could see her beginning to crumble. She had been so brave, so strong. As her son continued his welcoming, she looked on with pride. He was theirs as well as hers. Each of them had helped her to make his life possible. Without them he wouldn't have been born. Donald's arm tightened round Katie's shoulders. She wouldn't last much longer. He cleared his throat.

"Perhaps we should make our way into the big house now," he suggested. The chapel began to empty, as those gathered threaded their way through the narrow entrance. Soon only Katie and himself were left, still clinging to each other. Donald held her as the avalanche of emotion burst and she sobbed into his robes. Heartrending cries broke from deep within her, shaking her body violently. Donald held as he had so many times recently; until the sobbing eased; until her body stopped its shaking; until he felt that the wave of tears could wash no more. As her breathing became more controlled, he gently pushed her into view, and used a hankie to wipe her reddened eyes. He offered it to her and she blew her nose.

"Poor Donald," she attempted a weak smile, "Will I ever be done from crying?"

16

"Probably not, but it will feel a bit better in time, I promise you," he said with feeling. He could see her dig deep, take a big breath and lift her incredible spirit from the depths of her being.

"Right minister-brother-in-law, I think I can face them now!" She brushed her hair with her hands, wiped her face with her hankie, had a last blow of her nose and shot her arm through his. They walked from the chapel to the house to be with the friends and family who waited for them there. A pair of lusty lungs filled the air with crying above the noise within. Katie laughed.

"Just like his father. The show's over and now he needs to be fed!"

Afterwards

Meg watched as Donald hung up his robes in his study. Today had been so very hard. The anguished look had returned to his face now that there was no-one left to see. He slumped in his chair, put his elbows on his desk and held his head in his hands.

"That was hard today, Meg, harder than I'd ever thought it possible to be," The words escaped in short bursts as Donald tried to hold onto his emotions. Meg moved towards him, placed her gentle hands over his shoulders and round his neck. She rested her cheek on the top of his head. He turned towards her and buried his face in her breast. All the emotion of the day and the past year stirred within him needing to be purged. Meg's hands stroked his head as the deep sobbing welled up from the

centre of his being to break against her. She held him tightly as the flood of emotion tore through him, shaking him to his core. She held him tighter as the sobbing eased to its end. She could feel the tenseness of his body slip away, as his breathing sighed itself into a more even rhythm. Gently she stroked his head, humming as she did so. They remained like that for a while until, when he was ready, Donald looked up into the lovely eyes of his own Meg and smiled weakly. They didn't speak. They didn't need to. Love was mirrored between them, as deeply felt now as it had been when they were first together. Donald sighed deeply, rose to his feet and cradled his love in his arms. He kissed her forehead, each of her eyes and found her lips in a long lingering kiss. Meg looked into her husband's blue eyes and smiled, releasing herself from his embrace.

"I'll bring tea in about an hour. You have some quiet time now." She brushed his ruffled hair back into place, stroked his cheek and turned from him to quietly close the study door behind her as she left him. Donald watched her leave and thanked God for the gift He'd given to him in Meg.

The evening sun was almost behind the western hills, as he positioned himself in his porch chair. Meg was right as she always was, he needed some quiet time to centre himself and empty his mind of the day. He needed to be close to God, and then he would write as he always wrote to make sense of what had been. Perhaps his writing today would open the way to an understanding of what had happened over the last year; would release some of the pain and let a little healing in. Perhaps at last, he'd be able to write about his brother.

17

He clasped his hands in his lap and let his eyes take in the scene before him. It was a scene he knew well. As a boy, he'd often sat in this very chair, watching, marvelling at the promise that came with such a glorious end to a day. This place had inspired him to seek his spiritual being, called him to choose a life that was seen by so many as a waste of his immense talents, caused a huge divide between himself and his father that had only been breached in the few months before his father's passing, as an understanding was reached and there was peace between them.

Donald focused on the light, clearing his mind of the words that tumbled through it. The evening star twinkled into being. Clouds pinked over the horizon, deepening into streaks of red. The darkening hills held their edge, waiting to be consumed by the coming night. Geese flew, shaped to perfection, effortlessly. The lighthouse in the distance blinked. Donald breathed in the scene and began to sing.

18

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART ONE THE ISLAND

The Boat

Mary's thoughts were of home as the train came to a stop and she escaped from its confines. The journey had been long, a delay keeping them an hour more than their time at the previous station. It had been a quiet train, and it had been a cold train. Heating had been non-existent, as usual, and there had been no kent faces to blether to. Not that that normally stopped Mary, who would talk to anyone and everyone. The few bodies there seemed to be wrapped up in their own post Christmas blues and weren't for sharing them with anyone. Mary pulled her hat down over her ears as the biting North wind nipped them. It was a cold one today, but at least in a few hours she'd have the warmth of home to fill her and cheer her. She dragged her wheelie case through the station and out onto the ferry terminal. There was no sign of the boat as her eyes scanned the horizon. There was however a fair measure of white water spreading itself about. Mary's heart dropped. A knot tied itself in her stomach. It was going to be a rough one, if indeed the boat was to go at all. That familiar sick feeling widened its hold on her insides. She scolded herself for feeling this way. You'd think that at fifty, she'd be able to cope better with a journey she'd made countless times over those years. Her eyes dulled. A tear or two washed away the sparkle that had been there only moments ago as she thought of home. A vision of the familiar faces waiting at the pier as they always were, caused a slight smile to lift the edges of her mouth. She trundled along to the ticket office and entered. From her seat in the waiting room, Mary nervously eyed the turbulent water in the bay.

She stood up, walked to the door, looked again at the water and thought it to be calmer, walked back to her seat and sat down. In minutes she was on her feet again, walking to the door, staring at the water and willing it to calm down. It seemed rougher this time. Her stomach lurched as she turned to return to her seat, only to collide with an old sports jacket. It felt familiar, a smell of her childhood and of her grandfather and of home. She looked all the way up to the capped head of the body that was wearing the jacket; brought her eyes into focus on the face beneath the cap, and let them light up from deep within her heart.

“Angus? Angus! Angus! Where on earth did you spring from after all these years?” Mary beamed at this man who was her cousin and had been her best friend at school on their island home. Gone was the nauseous feeling in her stomach. Gone was her concern about the boat. She stepped forward and hugged her cousin until she'd almost hugged the breath out of him.

“Let me go woman! I canny get my breath!” Angus pushed Mary back then planted a smacker of a kiss on her forehead. “You're still not any bigger than you were Mary Beag when we were at school, though you're a wee bit more rounded than I remember, and you still pack a powerful hug! ” Angus laughed as he

pretended to rub his ribs as if they'd been broken. He patted Mary's head as she stood at least a foot shorter than him, then jumped side wards as she lunged forward to hug him again.

19

"No Mary! No Mary! I need to keep my ribs for the hugging they're going to get at home!" A huge smile spread over his face as he grabbed his cousin, lifted her off her feet, and twirled her round half a dozen times. Dizziness made them both sit and regain their breath. They looked at each other and collapsed with laughter. Then they began to talk in their native Gaelic. They talked of themselves, their families, what had been happening in their lives. They talked of folk at home. Still talking they mounted the gangway and made their way to the bar. The boat had left the pier and was on its way before either of them had drawn breath. Even the captain's announcement that the journey might be rather uncomfortable, given weather conditions, didn't register with them. They talked as the boat met the heaviest of seas. They laughed as the boat rolled and dipped through crashing bow waves. They bellowed as stories of childhood and escapades were recounted and relived, while the boat was lashed by wind and rain and other passengers were lying horizontal. An announcement from the captain did finally stop them in their flow of banter. The vessel was approaching their island home, and he hoped the journey had not been too uncomfortable. The whole journey had passed almost unnoticed.

"Well I never did," said Mary. Angus just shook his head. They picked up their bags and made for the gangway.

"You wait there Angus and we'll give them a surprise," said Mary as she climbed onto the steps and began to make her way down, pulling her case behind her. Uncle Andrew was waiting there at the foot to relieve her of her bag and give her a hug home. He shouted something that she couldn't quite hear because of the wind. As she got closer he shouted again.

"How was it then? A bit on the rough side lass?"

"The best journey ever!" responded Mary. Her Uncle looked dumbfounded and scratched his head.

"But Mary Beag, how on earth did you manage, you being such a terrible sailor?" Andrew challenged her.

"I had company. The best company ever!" said Mary with a twinkle as she stepped onto the pier and was swallowed up in her Uncle's big bear hug.

"So you had company then did you? It wouldn't be that prodigal son of mine returning to the fold, would it?" Andrew questioned knowing full well that his son was there.

"I should have guessed that there'd be no surprising you Uncle Andrew. No-one can

come to this island without you knowing!" Mary laughed.

A voice shouted from above them.

"Can I come out now? Is it safe to return to this Godforsaken island?"

Two pairs of eyes looked above and watched as Angus began his climb down the gangway. As his feet found the pier, his heart was fuller than it had been in years. His eyes met his father's and a welcome passed between them. He stepped forward and the hug that greeted him almost did break a rib.

"It's good to have you home, son!" Andrew said, his voice shaking.

"It's good to be home, dad!" Angus replied with equal emotion.

"Right lads.....now for the REAL welcome!" said Mary as she headed for the pier shed to meet and greet the friends and family that waited there.

20

"Aye, it is good to be home, and us the worst sailors on the island coming home on such a day and not being sick? A miracle it is. A miracle indeed!"

21

THE BROKEN ISLAND PART ONE THE ISLAND

After The Boat

"So you'll be swapping your collar for your piano tonight and just be our Donald will you?" Mary's eyes twinkled as she escaped from the almighty hug that her cousin had given her on meeting her at the pier shed. He looked as he always did, her big, jolly, cuddly first cousin and first love of her teenage years. Oh there was a time that she thought they'd be more than cousins, but that was before Meg came to work on the island that first summer before Donald went out to university. Once he saw Meg, he had eyes for no-one else. Pity, she wouldn't have had to change her name if she'd married Donald.

Mary hugged the line of folks, each in turn, exchanging news and good wishes for the Christmas that had just passed. She eventually caught up with her wheelie case that had been trundled off into Donald's waiting car.

"Will you take me round the long way, just so that I can see how things are now that all those new houses have been built?" she asked, settling herself into the passenger seat of Donald's landrover.

"You won't like it Mary. They stick out like sore thumbs. Four new houses all in one place; I can't remember when the last house was built before these ones. It must actually have been the big house itself." Donald responded.

"No, it wasn't the big house. You remember when we were wee, Uncle Ross had the new bungalow built when he moved out of the old croft house. That was the last one to be built before this last year." Mary said with a sureness that made Donald nod in agreement.

“As ever, Mary is right again,” he laughed, taking his eyes off the road for a moment to smile his approval to this special cousin of his.

“Eyes on the road, Donald mhór! I don’t want to end up in one of these enormous ditches!” Mary nudged her elbow into his side affectionately.

“It’s only cows that end up in these ditches, or maybe a ewe or two now and again!” he responded playfully, and got another dig in the ribs for good measure. They bantered on as Donald negotiated the road to the other side of the island where the manse was. Mary was going to stay with them over New Year, then return to her home in the south before Old New Year arrived. That was the plan, but boats at this time of the year had a habit of upsetting those plans. Maybe she’d be with them for Old New Year as well.

They passed the new houses and stopped for a while to look at their impact on the land. It was just as Donald had thought. Mary didn’t like them at all, and did think them intrusive on what had been a delightful and beautiful landscape. But they did both agree that they’d been necessary and had brought two new families with children to the island, and given better housing to two other families. There were plans to build more now that these had proven to be successful, but the site for them was on the other side of the island, close to the pier and not in a place that could spoil anyone’s outlook. They discussed changes on the island as they travelled, until

22

they reached the manse drive and made their way over the cattle grid and up to the front door.

Meg had been watching through her kitchen window for them, and now stood with the door open wide, waiting to greet their arrival.

“Come in Mary Beag. Oh it’s great to see you safely here, and after such a rough crossing. You must be cold and hungry. Get inside now and leave Donald to bring your bag!” Meg greeted Mary, gave her a warm hug and marched her inside to the cosiness of the coal-fired living room.

“I am hungry, but the journey wasn’t bad at all. I had Angus to keep me company, and you know how he can talk!” she smiled in response to Meg’s lovely welcome. “And you didn’t do any talking? Well that would be a first!” Meg laughed as she thought of Donald’s cousin being silent for more than a minute at a time.

“Well.....you know what I mean. He can spin a yarn and make it last an hour!” she enthused, “But it was good to see him and to know that he’s here for a while. Andrew will be so pleased to have him after so long.”

“Gossiping already girls? And me the starving wretch that’s never fed with my tongue hanging out!” Donald challenged them as he entered heaving Mary’s bag behind hem, pretending that it was enormously heavy.

“Starving? You? Not with a wife that’s one of the best cooks I’ve ever known!” Mary answered, prodding Donald’s ample girth affectionately, “Have you been baking today, Meg? Or is that not bread I can smell in the direction of your kitchen?” “Sit down at the table and you’ll find out, Mary. And Donald, we need some of your own ginger wine to go with dinner.” Meg returned to the kitchen to emerge a few minutes later with a tureen of hot soup and a basket of freshly baked bread. “Mmmmm! What a feast, Meg. Hurry up with the grace Donald Mhor, then we can do this justice,” Mary enthused, as she took her place at the table. With grace said they began to enjoy the feast before them, and even Mary only managed a few words between mouthfuls.

“Almost forgot!” Meg jumped from her seat and headed back to the kitchen. On her return, a huge dish of newly popped mussels was placed on the table. Meg grinned as Mary’s face lit up. Meg knew that one of her favourite foods was the one she used to pick from the shore at low tide when she was a girl.

“And I picked them myself this very morning, just for you!” Meg smiled, and was rewarded with a blown kiss as Mary pulled the shell of a mussel apart and emptied its contents into her mouth.

“This is HEAVEN!” exclaimed Mary, after swallowing another delicious mussel. “No,” said her cousin, “That’s where you go after you’ve been a good person all your life, and go to church on Sundays without fail!” Mary smiled at him and shook her head in agreement.

“I’ll be there. Wouldn’t miss it for the world, the lovely tea and pancakes after it make it worth the hard sit!” Mary teased, then got up and planted a kiss first on Meg’s cheek, then on Donald’s too.

“Oh it’s good to be home!” she exclaimed with real feeling.

23

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART ONE THE ISLAND

An Island New Year

Donald watched as the last few members of his congregation made their way down the drive to the road, and their waiting cars. No doubt they’d be discussing part of his sermon; or maybe they’d be more likely to be discussing what they’d be having for tea tonight. He smiled and shook his head. At least they came. He consoled himself with the thought that somewhere in the week ahead, something of what he had said might be remembered and thought about. But then the week ahead wasn’t any ordinary week. This was the first week of a new year; a new beginning; a time to put the past behind and move into the future. How good it would be to wipe out this past year and think that it had never happened, but then that wasn’t in God’s plan. What happened, happened, and there would be some lessons in all of it, in time.

Donald gathered his bible and notes and made a final check of all heaters and lights. Satisfied that they were all switched off and unplugged, he let himself out of the little back door of the church and turned towards his car. He didn't lock the church, that wasn't the way here. The church was open at all times, all hours. He could imagine what his elders in the city would say to that. Their church had to have padlocks on the gates, bars on the windows and mortice locks on all doors. It was hardly the most welcoming sight for visitors or members, but a necessity of living in that part of the world today. Leaving his bible and notes on the rear seat, he pulled off his shoes, put on his boots, swapped his jacket for a fleece and removed his collar for the last time this year. It was after all Hogmanay; there was no service for another week and he could just be Donald for the next few days. What a lovely thought. He closed the door of his car and set off for his usual walk home. He did this every Sunday, rain or shine. The walk cleared his head, raised his spirits and focused his mind on the beauty of creation. As ever, he sang as he went.

An hour later, after speaking to three different folks on the way, he approached the manse drive. He could hear laughter and music, and smiled to himself. It was good to have Mary here, just the person to see in this particular New Year with. He climbed the few steps to the door and let himself in.

“What on earth?” laughter filled him and overflowed in gales as he saw first his wife then his cousin dressed in the most outlandish outfits.

“A couple of swells? Look more like a couple of clowns if you ask me!” he said dodging a bashed top-hat that was aimed his way.

“We....thought.....it'd be fun.....” said Mary breathlessly. Meg just sat on the carpet, tears washing the mascara from her lashes into streaks on her cheeks. “Something different.....” She eventually gasped when she controlled her giggling long enough to speak.

“Different you certainly are! But if you think I'd be seen dead going out with the pair of you looking like that.....,” Donald ducked again as the second top-hat attempted to decapitate him, and made a hasty about turn. His face was alight. They were going to have fun this New Year, and oh how they and so many other folks on

24

the island needed a measure of it too. His dear cousin was the tonic they all needed to gin them up. A sudden thought made him turn back and return to the living room. “Since you're both so occupied, I'll make dinner,” he said and left to turn to the kitchen instead of his study as he'd usually do on a Sunday. The voices were silenced. Mary looked at Meg and Meg looked at Mary.

“Donald? Make dinner? Donald?” said an incredulous Meg.

“This I have to see!” said Mary and let out a roar of laughter that started Meg off

again. Donald, from the kitchen, was beginning to regret his jesture. He reached for the can-opener, found a tin of beans and began to open it.

“Beans on toast.....a good healthy meal for a Hogmanay!” he smiled.

The Bells

It was now four thirty. The New Year was well into being. For the first time in many a long year, Donald and Meg had decided to stay at home, and Mary with them. It was island tradition that you either went round first-footing, or you waited for the first-footers to come to you. It was also the custom to leave a light on, then firstfooters would call. Already, there had been a spate of first-footers at the manse. And each and every one of them had howled with laughter at the sight of Meg and Mary in their swell gear, particularly when they gave their rendition of the number made famous by Astaire and Garland.

The house at the moment was heaving. A ceilidh was going on in the living room with Duncan on his box, Angus on his guitar, the new teacher on his fiddle and Peter on his mouth-organ. Meg and Mary were playing pots with wooden spoons, and Kirsty, much to Donald’s delight, was singing her heart out. It was good to see the manse having a party. For so long it had been a no-go area because of the beliefs of the last minister. People were scared even to set foot in the place. Donald and Meg had changed that, in the short time they were here for the exchange. They had dinner parties and afternoon teas for some of the older islanders, and even held a children’s party for one of the families who had little room in their wee cottage. Donald believed that God wanted people to be happy, and they were certainly happy enough tonight. Yes there were some drams being passed around, but no-one was out-ofhand. The sheer enjoyment of being together was spirit enough to celebrate the passing of the old and the coming of the new.

Sometime later, Donald sought the quiet of the kitchen for a moment away from the ceilidh that was still in full swing. It appeared to be empty, though the back door was slightly open. He moved to close it and heard a gentle sobbing from outside. Opening the door he saw that Katie was sitting on the step with her head held in her hands.

“Mind if your old brother-in-law joins you?” he asked gently. Katie looked up and smiled through her tears. She nodded and Donald sat down beside her, immediately putting an arm round her shoulder. They sat in silence for a while, then Donald began to speak in the softest of voices.

“I feel your loss too Kirsty, especially now. John Angus was my wee brother, but in a way was everybody’s wee brother. We all miss him. He was one of us, a special

he certainly is in spirit. I can hear him singing with the others through there. I can feel him in the room smiling at the antics of Meg and Mary. He would have done that. He would have got dressed up with them.”

“I believe that too, Donald. That’s what I hold onto when I miss him too much. I remember the fun we had, the laughs we shared, the love that made us work well together. I feel him too, just like you do. Sometimes I’m so sure he’s there beside me, I talk to him. People will think I’m daft!” she said in all sincerity.

“No, you’re not daft. Just you go ahead and talk to him.” he assured her.

“But Donald, sometimes I’m not nice to him. I shout at him and damn him for leaving me, then I burst into tears and say how sorry I am. It’s just so hard to be separated from him. Sometimes I wish.....” she faltered.

“That you’d gone with him?” questioned Donald. Kirsty looked up into his kind eyes and nodded. “But then who would look after the wee boy who is his father’s image?”

“I know. I know. But I still wish.....” Kirsty went on. Donald sighed and pulled her in close to his side. He had often wished the same himself. First his father, then his brother had died. Two deaths in as many months was painful to bear. There were times when he really didn’t want to go on. He had turned his back on God and fought hard to hold on to his faith. But he was still here, getting on with his work and living with the pain, accepting it now as something to be gone through, never to disappear, but in time to ease a little. The pain made him realise that he was living. It also made him realise how much he had loved both his father and brother.

“You and I have been given a precious thing you know Kirsty. We’ve been left to paint a picture for wee John-Angus that will bring his father to life for him. He can see what he was like in pictures, but we’re the ones who loved him best and knew him best. We’re the ones who can make the memories we have of John, live again. Isn’t that a very special reason to go on? Isn’t that a purpose for living?” Donald said emotionally.

“I suppose so,” murmured Kirsty, her voice brightening, “ like the time he blackened the windows of old Murdo’s house , so that he’d think it was still night and he’d miss the morning shooting competition?”

“Or the time he terrified Jean as she was walking past the graveyard, with a sheet over his head?” Donald laughed at the memory. “ He was quite a lad our John!”

“And his son will be quite a lad to, if he takes after him in even the tiniest of ways!” she said rising to her feet and pulling Donald to his, “The time for crying is over. Wee John Angus will be one next month, so that’s a time to look forward to. I think we’ll have a party and hire one of those bouncy castle things you get on the mainland. That’ll be fun. And we can get Jeanma to make his cake and Auntie Meg

to make a dumpling and.....” Donald stopped her flow of ideas with an enormous hug.

Together they returned to the kitchen and made their way back over the legs of the bodies that filled the living room. It was now six thirty on this first morning of a new year, and no-one was for moving. Donald made a space for himself beside Meg and whispered in her ear.

“ Give them another hour and we’ll make breakfast for them!”

26

“No, No, No, that’s much too early Donald. It needs to be at least nine o’clock before we have breakfast!” Meg laughed in response.

27

28

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART TWO THE MAINLAND

Shock

Colin’s eyes focused through the bus window to the rain-washed road and pavements. The morning rush had begun. Time was money and the pace of those making their way to work wasn’t lessened, despite the fury of the incessant downpouring.

Umbrellas, raincoats and boots fought against the deluge, chose the path with greatest shelter under awnings and shop-doorways, or bravely launched out to find the most direct route to save time, regardless of the soaking power of today’s rain.

There had been weeks of relentless rain, often accompanied by severe winds. Drains couldn’t cope and roads had been flooded and re-flooded all over the city, causing chaos at rush hours at the beginning and end of every busy day. It was depressing, this constant grayness. Light never seemed to be able to penetrate the denseness of the sky. The sun, in its weakened winter position, hadn’t the strength to disperse the clouds and therefore appeared to give up trying.

Colin wiped a space to see clearer through the condensation gathered on the window beside him. Next stop was his, though he wished it would never come. He half contemplated missing the stop and the appointment awaiting him, but he knew that it had to be faced, and only he could face it, alone.

A few other passengers were preparing to leave the bus with him, as coats were fastened, hoods raised over heads, and umbrellas loosened ready for a quick push into operation the minute they were free of the confines of the bus. Colin joined the queue, collar raised to offer maximum protection. He donned his faithful woolly hat. It’d been everywhere with him, knitted by his grannie, and always a reminder to him of his childhood days on his island home. Every stitch contained a memory of times

spent growing up surrounded by the love of his home and family. He'd taken many a wagging about wearing it from his city-dwelling friends, but he never let their jibes put him off wearing it.

Head bent, he stepped onto the waiting pavement, then turned right and followed the route that he'd taken only last Tuesday. Exactly one week ago, he'd walked this self-same route to begin the tests that today's walk would discover the outcome of. The feeling in his stomach reached his throat and he gasped for air. He swallowed, as if to push back the panic that was rising out of him, threatening to engulf him. His mind took over and he calmed himself. There was no point in panicking. What would be would be. He couldn't change it. That was what he believed. If the outcome of the tests was bad news, he'd handle it in time. He'd had bad news before. If it wasn't bad news, then there'd be nothing to worry about. Whatever the outcome, he could cope. Love always got you through the pain of bad times, and he had plenty of love around him. He smiled and felt his dampening body warm a little as he remembered the face at the window with its shining eyes, masking the fear so carefully from him, wanting him to go feeling positive.

29

The doors of the hospital block opened in front of him, ushering him into the reception area. He stepped forward, handing his appointment card to the receptionist, and waited while she checked his name against her day's list. He found a seat in the lounge and waited.

Colin dialed the number. One ring and the receiver was lifted at the other end. "There's good and bad, more than we hoped for. I'll be home in twenty minutes. See you!" Colin replaced the receiver before there was time for a response. He stood in the phone kiosk, his eyes closed, resting his head on one of the walls. His mind emptied of words and thoughts and filled with a silent numbness that eased its way through the whole of him. How long he stood like that, he didn't know, but when he forced his eyes open again, it took him a few minutes to realize where he was. His mind returned to action and he knew that he must make his way home quickly. He needed to be home. He needed to spill the contents of his mind. He needed to release the news that'd just been given to him.

"Home. I must get home," he muttered to himself. "Taxi.....I'll get a taxi.....save time. Chris'll be worried."

He lifted the receiver, dialed the number and ordered the taxi. He leant against the kiosk wall for a moment, adjusted his hat, then made his way to the front door. He looked at his watch. It was only nine thirty and his appointment had been at nine, thirty minutes. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

The taxi sped through the streets, stopping and starting as lights directed. Its

windscreen wipers fought in measured breaths, back and forwards, back and forwards, pacemakers that maintained the driver's vision. The ride was a silent one. The driver, sensing that his passenger wasn't in a talkative mood, closed the glass window between them and turned off the radio.

Colin paid the fare, stepped back onto the pavement and ran into the close. He took the steps two at a time and reached the second floor landing in moments. The door was open. Chris was there. He launched himself forward into waiting arms. Tears exploded from everywhere as his mind released his body. Chris's arms held him through the violent sobbing until it was done.

30

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART TWO THE MAINLAND

An Island Apart

Colin moved the ground-row an inch upstage onto the yellow marks. That inch could mean the difference between a cloth flying in smoothly or snagging, and he didn't like snags. He knew the theatre crew thought him to be over fussy, but as Company Stage Manager, it was his job to be fussy, so much depended on his careful attention to detail. It kept the prima donnas sweet, and while they were sweet, life was easy for him and the whole cast. If so much as a prop were out of place, there'd be hell to pay, so he fussed and checked and re-checked until he was sure that all was set. He called beginners and took his place in the corner.

This was the time he loved. He put on his cans and immediately felt that familiar buzz of adrenalin rise within him. He checked that everyone was in place, cued the house lights to half, and then out, then cued the MD to go. As the overture began, he followed the music score. It was a minute or two yet. The notes rang out as his fingers moved over them. Standby and go; the house tabs flew out. Light flooded the stage and for a second or two the cast stood motionless, like a snapshot image captured on camera. Music cued them and the scene came to life. The opening number burst into being.

Colin smiled broadly, checked upstage in the wings, settled himself on his high swivel chair and adjusted the cans over his ears. His mind focused on the book in front of him. He'd have to give all of his concentration to its contents from now on, as he cued lights, sound, scene changes and music. This was his job and he loved it. Theatre was his life. Shows like this were oxygen to him. If he could live his life again, this is exactly what he'd do. He was made for it and it for him.

"OK folks, thank you all for another marvellous show. Oiche va Hiemiomerach," Colin ended his message with a Gaelic goodnight, much to the amusement of the mainly English company, and removed the cans from his ears. He dropped the iron, checked that all the power was off, closed the book and gave his body a good stretch.

The crew were on form tonight. The set had been struck quickly and the stage now lay empty. Darkness filled it as lights were turned off. A narrow leak of light reached out from the props room only as far as the upstage tab. Colin walked through the illuminated doorway, and seeing no-one inside, turned back and stepped onto the bare inky-black stage.

He could still feel the warmth of the recently switched off lamps. The smell of make-up and perfume and sweat filled his nostrils. Noises off-stage echoed to him from distant dressing rooms; chattering; laughter; the rush to get out of costume and into party clothes. He stood for a moment and waited. It would come about now. There it was. Colin clasped his hands together and closed his eyes. Peace filled him. Stillness seeped into his whole being. His mind eased into wordlessness. No images cluttered his vision. He remained motionless savouring this state of release until he was refreshed. He breathed deeply a few times, gently shook his body, then made his way to his dressing room. An image of a sandy cove lit by sunshine, popped into his mind. He smiled as he thought of that peaceful place on his island home. It was a

31

long way away from the city, but this little ritual, performed on stage every night, calmed him and seemed to bring the serenity of the island right into his presence. He ran up the stairs two at a time, turned a corner and collided with what seemed like a brick wall.

“What’s this Mr. Company Stage Manager? Running in the theatre? That’ll never do!!” the voice mocked laughingly.

“Chris! Have you been working out again? I feel as if I’ve been hit by Murdo’s old bull!” Colin said as he rubbed his chest and shoulder. “ I didn’t think anyone was still here. Off with the make-up and out to the pub is the usual after-show procedure, is it not?”

“Not to-night. I’ve got a date with a certain Mr. Company Stage Manager, or had you forgotten?” Chris responded. Colin looked puzzled then remembered the party that’d been arranged between shows.

“James’s do! I had forgotten. Give me fifteen minutes and I’ll be with you,” and with that Colin rushed to the next landing, opened the door of his dressing room and transformed himself from his blacks to checked shirt and jeans in a matter of ten minutes. He was at the stage door in another two to be greeted by an applauding Chris.

“Very good Mr. Company Stage Manager. Now let’s party!”

“Be good boys!” cautioned Billy, the stage-doorman, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

“Well that gives us a whole lot of scope then William!” responded Colin as he

hung up his keys and breezed out of the tiny room, winking at the doorman as he pulled open the outer door to the street. “We’ll tell you all about it tomorrow, if you’re interested, but then maybe you’re not interested, given your declining years!” “I’ll have less of the declining years my lad. I’m still in my prime, I’ll have you know, and could out-party you any month of the year!” Billy drew in his corpulence and pulled himself up to his full five foot two. His balding head shone beneath the wisps of hair that fought to remain over it. “Here, take this excuse for a hat with you before I give it to the cat to play with!”

“That hat is exceptional. There’s not another one like it in the whole of Glasgow!” Colin pulled the hat on with pride, and viewed his image in the stage-door window. “Maybe I should ask my Jeanma to knit one for you, William, since you’ve nothing else to keep your wee head warm!” Colin ducked as an arm thrust out to attempt to knock off his toorie. He escaped into the street and mimicked Billy threatening a fist at him, before joining Colin in the waiting taxi. Moments later, they were spun off into the darkness, leaving Billy laughing and wishing he were a few years younger.

He switched on his kettle, pulled out his paper and sat down on the big comfortable armchair that took up most of the space in the room. All of the cast were out now, and he settled down to await the coming night. He never minded being on night duty, he loved being in a theatre, night or day. All his life had been spent in one, one way or another. He’d done everything from stage crew to dressing to understudy and that one part on-stage that would live in his memory forever. It may only have been underneath the bed of a pantomime dame, but he’d spent twelve weeks there, every performance, and not many people could say that they’d spent

32

that amount of time under the great star’s bed. He laughed as he remembered the tantrums and cajolings of that particular show. The old stars were the best prima donnas. The new ones of today couldn’t hold a candle. He filled his mug, swapped his paper for a battered old photograph album and settled down into his chair for a spot of reminiscing. Before long an aging tabby perched itself on top of the chair back, then slid down onto Billy’s sleeping form to cover his threadbare head with a hat that was warmer than Colin’s woolly one would ever be.

33

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART TWO THE MAINLAND

Rehearsals

Billy’s eyes, bloodshot and tired as they were, sparkled as he viewed the scene on the open stage. The dancers were rehearsing with the principal boy, going through a number that had gone a little astray during the previous performance. Colin,

professional as ever, had picked up on it and called a rehearsal before the first show of the day. He watched with admiration as they moved, synchronised, responding effortlessly to the routine. He watched their suppleness of movement and remembered how he'd been in his youth before age had re-shaped him into his now cuddly self. He could have been a dancer, but his blessed father wouldn't have it. No son of his was ever going to prance around in tights. A frown swept over his cheery face and wiped the shine from his eyes.

An image of his father formed in his mind. It was a figure in angry pose, red-faced, towering above him, daring him to defy. Yet defy he did. That day Billy walked out of his father's house and never returned. That was the day he'd left home for good to begin his life in the theatre. It was also the day he'd told his father he was gay and he was going to live with an actor. He was seventeen. It had taken him four years to summon the courage to confront his father, and here he was at last, making his stand.

His father's tirade had been lengthy. He took it all without a response, laid his house key on the table and left without a backward glance. As he walked down the driveway and out of the gates, clutching his small case of clothes, his heart leapt as energy flooded into his body and he ran down the road beaming the biggest smile to all who passed him by. He was free. Free. Free. He remembered dancing with his case, much to the amusement of a group at a bus stop; cart-wheeling along the pavement, then trapezing along a wall, his case balanced precariously on his head. Happiness oozed from his very being. Today was the best day of his life; the first real day of his life. Today William died and Billy was born. Billy. Billy.

“Billy? Billy?” Colin’s voice returned him to the here and now. He wandered on stage and acknowledged the call with his usual response, “Ever ready. How can I serve? “

“Tea, Billy, five minutes?” asked Colin with a grin.

“Maybe gin would be better. They do look as if they need reviving. You’re working them too hard Mr. Company Manager!” Billy’s comments raised applause and cheers from the group who were obviously feeling the effects of the session, or perhaps the effects of yet another party night. “Your own special brew is better than any spirit I know, and it’s also the best hangover cure there is,” smiled Colin as he shoo-ed Billy off-stage into the props room to prepare it. “One more time. From the top!” Colin returned his attention to the dancers and cued the music from the pit. Billy whistled as he filled the large teapot from the urn. ‘He said five, but it’ll be ten,’ he thought to himself, ‘plenty of time to stew the brew.’ He was right. Ten minutes later he was pouring mugfulls as the dancers spread themselves over chairs and on the floor beside him. Banter crackled amongst them as last night’s party was

explored in detail. Billy listened as he poured further mugfulls of revival, until Colin
34

called time and they flew back to dressing rooms to shower and change then head out for that precious hour or so of freedom before returning to prepare for the first show of the day. Colin waited to help clear the debris. He put an affectionate arm around Billy's shoulders and squeezed.

"Thanks Billy. You do look after us all far too well. We don't deserve you!" he enthused.

"Thank you kind sir. May I ask where the sparkle in your eye has come from today?"

Good party? Better than good? Is there something I should know?" Billy looked Colin straight in the face and tried to prise the information from him with his questioning.

"Better than good and that's all you're going to know for now," beamed Colin.

"Tell!" said Billy invitingly as he held on to Colin's arm.

"Tell what?" Chris's face appeared at the props' room door. Colin immediately blushed, his boyish face exploding with colour.

"The time! Time to go for lunch!" responded Colin as he patted Billy's bald patch and rushed out. Billy looked at the empty doorway and grinned thoughtfully.

"More than a good party indeed!" He turned the urn down, switched off the lights and headed for the stage door. Tom was there, on duty for the day. They spent five minutes or so passing on information, then Billy picked up his jacket and hat, signed out and left.

The street outside was wet, though the rain seemed to be off at the minute. It was light, something that always surprised Billy when he came outside. He headed for home with no real desire to go there. The theatre was his home and it always would be. His tiny flat only served to house his few possessions and offer him a place to find a few hours sleep. His hand rubbed his chest as that strange tightness appeared again. 'Probably indigestion,' he thought and began to chew another remegel. He browsed the photographs outside the front of house doors, then straightened his hat before crossing at the lights.

"Home," he said to himself. His eyes caught the sign above the stage door and he smiled.

35

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART TWO THE MAINLAND

Last Respects

Colin could see that it was standing room only as he and Chris made their way to the crematorium door. Every seat was occupied, and every space between, beside

and behind was filled with people standing in respectful silence. They joined the queue still waiting to go in and found themselves being ushered forwards right to the front, to stand beside the raised platform that would receive the coffin.

A chord on the organ and the entrance of the priest signalled its arrival. Those seated raised themselves as the coffin made its way to the little platform, carried by four boys from the permanent stage crew. Both Chris and Colin were close enough to reach out and touch the flower arrangement that lay on top. Shaped into the words Ever Ready, it was the only thing to adorn the beautiful wooden casket. Those who could were seated again as the priest began the short service that would offer a fond farewell to one of the theatre's best-known and much-loved characters. Colin and Chris stood beside the coffin throughout, until it slowly began to slide towards a curtained area during the last hymn. Colin reached over and patted the coffin. He reached into his jacket and drew out a show programme, placing it fondly among the flowers.

“Everyone signed it for you Billy! It’s the final one for your collection!” Colin spoke and attempted a smile. As if to acknowledge it, the coffin stopped, only for a second, but long enough for everyone to laugh, then cheer as it began to move again towards the waiting final curtain. Then it was gone. Billy was gone.

It had been an emotional farewell. Everyone from the present company had been there along with people from other companies who regularly performed at the theatre. Billy would have been delighted to see such a huge turnout at his finale. Waiting for the gathering to slowly exit through the small narrow doors, Chris drew Colin’s attention to an elderly man sitting a few rows from the front. His bald head was cradled in his hands and he was obviously in great distress. Colin watched as he got up and stumbled his way to the door, almost falling over a couple of times. Chris moved quickly to steady him as Colin appeared on his other side. The old fellow looked at them both, murmured his thanks and stumbled on. In moments he was out of sight, through the entranceway and into the open space beyond.

“Do you know him?” Chris asked.

“Never seen him before, but there’s something about him that rings a bell!” replied Colin.

“He’s in some state. Do you think we should go after him?” asked Colin concerned about the old fellow’s welfare.

“Maybe we should offer him a lift,” said Chris.

They made their way outside and looked for the slight figure. It had disappeared. Making their way to the car, they exchanged waves and words here and there with others. It took quite a while for the large number of vehicles to leave, and by the time Colin was manoeuvring towards the road to town, the car park was almost empty.

Colin steered into the road, checked for traffic both ways, then accelerated towards the roundabout. Both feet shot to the floor and the car shuddered to a halt as a small
36

fragile figure fell into the roadway in front of them. Mercifully, they had missed him. Chris was out in a flash to help the old fellow onto his feet.

“Are you alright? Have you hurt yourself?” Colin appeared beside them to offer assistance. Standing now, unaided, the old fellow looked at each of them in turn. His face crumpled as tears rained over his white, almost transparent cheeks. Chris and Colin exchanged knowing glances. This was the old fellow who had been so distressed in the crematorium.

“Why don’t you come and sit down for a while,” Chris said as he gently ushered the old fellow towards the car and into the front seat, “You’ve had a bit of a tumble!”

“Thanks,” he said as he took up the offer and climbed gingerly into the car. Colin took his seat at the wheel and looked over at his passenger.

“Maybe you could do with a drink!” The old fellow nodded.

“Maybe we ALL could!” said Chris as he closed the rear door and caught Colin’s eye in the mirror.

“And I know just the place!” said Colin moving off carefully in the direction of town. He almost had to repeat his emergency stop when his passenger spoke.

“Billy was my son.”

37

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART TWO THE MAINLAND

The end of an era and the beginning of another

Colin’s thoughts raced as he increased his pace along the relatively empty streets. It was early, very early for him. But he had to be on the ball today, there was a lot to get through. He turned the corner and saw the light above the stage door. It was never off. Day and night it shone, regardless of whether the theatre itself was open or closed. There was always someone there twenty-four-seven., and Colin himself had been in there at every hour of some day or night. Get-outs sometimes went on into the wee small hours, or even right through the night depending on the show. Get-ins started early, and sometimes even began as the Get-out finished. Working in the theatre was an all-day, every-day experience. It tended to be fairly nocturnal, given the evening shows. With the adrenaline rush slow to disappear, the inevitable after show celebration was born in a dressing room and grew to a fully blown party at someone’s flat. During the run of a show, there were never many hours for sleep. Colin’s hand massaged his forehead gently, remembering the whiskies of the night before and indeed of today. He screwed up his face as the slight throb attacked his head with its unrelenting rhythm. The resolve tablet was just beginning to have a tiny

effect, which the fresh air around him was supporting. He didn't mind the hangover. The party had been worth every bit of it. Hangovers were not really something he often faced. He didn't drink that much nowadays, and never drank during show days. Saturday night was the only night he allowed himself a dram or two, and only after the final curtain was down. He was used to the stick he got from some of the cast who would get legless after the show night after night. Despite their attempts to encourage his participation, he retained his position and left the partying to them. And party they did, sleeping off the effects into the early afternoon, until, white-faced and swallowing coffee by the mugfull, they'd appear to make-up and dress for the matinee performance. As Colin did his usual pre-show check, he would be shushed and shoed away as he made his way from room to room. His noisy cheerfulness would attract a shoe here or a personal prop there. He dodged them as he dodged the insults that flew along with them.

Today was Sunday. It was his day off and yet here he was entering the stage door again. Popping his head through the glass opening he was surprised to see that Billy was not in his usual place. He was just about to call his name when he remembered that Billy wasn't there. His heart sank as memories of the recent funeral and indeed last night's party afterwards caused him to close his eyes and allow a deep frown to register on his face. Emotion that had been halted, released itself as tears rolled down his cheeks. Sadness filled his whole being. He stood for minutes not wanting to open his eyes. And then he did. He searched the little room and noted the empty chair with its well-used cardigan crumpled in a heap for ER, Billy's cat. He drew in a deep breath and whispered softly, "Bye Billy. We're all going to miss you!" Punching in the door code, he pushed and entered. Through the swing doors, along the short corridor, and then he emerged from the relative light to the total darkness that was the empty stage. It had been struck to the wall the night before to allow a new coat of paint to be applied to its floor. A slight smell of that new application still lingered. It

38

would be gone by the morning when the permanent crew would be in early to remark before the first show of a new week. The iron was down blocking out any light from the front of house and auditorium. Colin stopped and let himself merge with the dark and the silence. He allowed the peacefulness that he always found here, drench him. He wiped the wet from his cheeks and gently stroked the remaining throbs from his forehead. Reaching for the light switch inside the prop room door, he hesitated, then drew his hand back, leaving the light off. Work could wait. His feet moved him effortlessly onto the middle of the stage. He could find his way around this place blindfold. Working in the dark and in black-outs in particular was part of back-stage life. And theatre life was his life. It had been Billy's too.

Theatre was in his blood. It energized him. He lived for these hours and days and weeks of a run and dreaded the months afterwards when no work was available and depression set in. Those were his dark days. He feared them. He knew how much they cost him and people around him. He was difficult to live with then, impossible. He closed his eyelids tight and dragged his mind away from the very thought of them. He wasn't going there today, not ever if he could help it. With a shudder he brought himself back to the present and began his usual routine of instructing his body and mind into the peaceful zone. He allowed himself to sit in his usual, comfortable, cross-legged fashion. Once down, he began to move his head from side to side. He heard the cracks and rolled his head over one shoulder, then the other. He rested his chin on his chest. With forearms over his knees he turned his palms upwards, stretching his fingers as he did so. He began to focus on his breathing and gradually drew deeper and deeper breaths. He let his head rest comfortable and closed his eyes. Stillness touched every part of his being. It calmed his body and emptied his mind of thought. He sat in this ocean of peace and let himself drown in it. He felt suspended in time. He felt good, better, much better.

After a long while he let his mind pick up an image of a beach lapped by oceanic blue. He placed himself on it, sat himself near the water's edge and imagined its wetness on his toes. He stretched his neck back and raised his face to the sun.

Warmth spread across his forehead, over his cheeks and down onto his neck. He imagined the light breeze flickering through his hair; quivering the machair behind him into its wispy song. He pushed his head further back and imagined gulls rising above the frothing waves; seals languishing on skerries; Neillie's boat putting along from creel to creel emptying each of its glorious contents. His mouth watered at the thought of a crab dressed to perfection. He imagined himself waving to Neillie, then returning it to trace through the sand beside him, letting it fall through his fingers to a new resting place. He imagined the feel of the tiny grainy pieces as he rubbed his hand over them, then scooping them together into a tiny mound. He reached back with his hand and imagined himself stroking Rhona's head.

He felt the smooth texture of her fine hair, soft under his fingers. He felt the wetness of her tongue lick his hand to encourage further stroking. She licked again and Colin's mind became puzzled. Something wasn't right. The tongue felt rough. It couldn't be Rhona. He felt the tongue lick again and opened his eyes. The images of the beach had been replaced by the intense darkness of the theatre stage. He let his eyes grow accustomed to it before turning his head to the side and looking down. He could feel the licking. The licking was real, but it wasn't a dog. It was a cat. He could

head and it began to purr. Gently Colin lifted it into his lap. He knew this little cat well. It was ER, Billy's old cat. It had been in the theatre as long as Colin could remember, longer even. But then Billy had been in the theatre as long as he could remember too. ER purred appreciatively as Colin continued to stroke it. It was already missing Billy, that was for sure. It must have been looking all over for him. And now there was no Billy. Colin pulled the tiny ball of fur closer and hugged it. "He's gone ER, but your old master will never ever be forgotten!" he whispered with feeling. The little cat raised its eyes up to look at Colin and then nudged its head against his chest. The theatre wouldn't be the same without Billy, and it wouldn't be the same without ER.

"So what'll happen to you old fellow? Will one of the crew take you home or will someone just adopt you?" Colin whispered thoughtfully. The seed of an idea was beginning to form. Raising himself to his feet he walked the few steps off stage and into the corridor still hugging his furry bundle. In moments he had laid the cat safely on Billy's chair, where it immediately curled itself into Billy's old cardigan. As he looked at it, the thought that had been a seed, grew into a possibility. He reached for the phone in his pocket, keyed in the number and waited for a response.

"Chris! Billy's cat! I've just had a thought!" he said excitedly.

40

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART TWO THE MAINLAND

Will

Rain splattered against the window pane, shattering the peace of the room beyond. Will turned his head on the pillow and watched the droplets form, then slither down the glass to form small puddles of wetness on the gathering sill. His face crumpled as thoughts of Billy, his son, inside the wooden casket, filled his consciousness. He couldn't quite believe that Billy was dead. Dead was so final; so desperately lost; never to be again. Will closed his eyes and pushed his cheek further into the pillow, surprised to feel its dampness. But then he had cried most of the night. Silent tears escaped hour by hour as his body sought release. He tried to hold them back; walked the floor daring them to flow; but they trickled past his stubborn refusals and congregated relentlessly around his weary eyes; then he caved in and let the plugged emotion escape in an avalanche that wracked his whole being with a violence that he had never experienced in his seventy years of living. His body could make little protest as his heart broke into piercing fragmented shards. It was out of control. The pain was unbelievably hard to bear. He walked the floor as wave after wave of emotion surged through his being. He sat with his hands holding his head and made no attempt to halt the flood of tears that accompanied sobs torn from deep within. He pummelled the pillow with his fists as anger, too much anger, welled up and

spilled into aggressive outpourings. And then he was spent. He collapsed on the chair and drew his little shoe-box of memories close to him. They were all he had now. He'd lost his chance to have more. Memories of his only son in one small box; a lifetime reduced to something the size of his foot. Billy was dead. Will wished he was dead too. He turned his face to the window and watched as a drop of rain began its journey down the pane of glass. He lost his focus on it and let wetness close his eyelids. Moments later he was asleep.

Avoiding the debris at the entrance to the close, Colin picked his way up the two flights of worn stairs. He noticed the senseless graffiti etched onto the once shiny tiled walls; the used needles and condoms discarded recklessly by their users, and shook his head. It was easy to condemn those who shared themselves and left others to pick up the pieces. It would be easy to stand on the moral high ground and pontificate, but he could picture from behind eyes that had lost hope and been overtaken

by addiction. He had walked the walk himself, though fortunately he'd pulled himself out of the downward spiral to the safety of a rehab programme. He remembered his utter despair. He recalled the time after time that he had promised and tried and failed.....

His eyes re-focused on the close and the stairs to the flat above. He remembered the close he had lived in when he had first come to the city; an old one like this with wally tiles. It had been spotless. Agnes had seen to that. She had lived in the downstairs flat all her life and ensured that every tenant did their 'turn' washing the stairs and keeping the whole close clean and tidy. No one challenged Agnes. She was a big lady, a formidable one, who could reduce anyone, however tall, to a midget in front of her with one look. Her voice could crack plates. Colin smiled as he remembered her dealing with any tenant who defaulted. She watched for them

41

coming, barred their way into the close and gave them a word or two to the wise. Within minutes they were out on the landing with mop and bucket. As they laboured, she'd stand within sight of them, even if it meant climbing up to the top floor. Under her gaze the stairs were brought to a respectable state and close walls were made to shine. Without another word, she'd return to her bottom flat and the neglectful tenant would return to theirs.

'Changed days,' thought Colin, as he proceeded up the stairs to find himself standing on the top floor landing. Agnes would have had the proverbial 'fit' if she could have seen this place today. He found number 18 and knocked. There was no response. He knocked again, then rattled the old brass letterbox. He waited. There was no sound from inside. He knocked again and was rewarded this time by

scufflings from the other side of the door. An edge of dim light spilled into the relative darkness of the close landing. Opening a sliver .the door creaked as far as the chain would allow and a head appeared in the gap. Bloodshot eyes clouded with suspicion met Colin's until a hint of recognition lit them and the faintest of smiles crept onto the face at the door.

"Hello Mr. Differ. Do you remember me? I'm Billy's friend. We met at the funeral," said Colin encouragingly.

"I remember you Colin. Just give me a minute to unhitch this awful chain and you can come in. The place is a mess mind you. I'm not used to visitors!" said Will unclipping the chain and pulling the door wide, "Come in lad, come in!" Colin stepped into the tiny hallway and waited for Will to close and re-chain the door before ushering him into his sitting room.

"Sit down lad, sit down. It's good to see you. I didn't really thank you properly for the other day, after the funeral, after Billy....." Will's voice stilled momentarily, then continued, "Can I make you a cup of tea?"

"That would be grand. Need a hand?" replied Colin.

"No thanks lad. Just sit yourself down if you can find a spot, and I'll get the kettle on." Will shuffled behind a curtain and proceeded to fill a kettle with water.

Colin's eyes scanned the walls of the small flat. It was bereft; sad and colourless. A small couch, an old fireside chair and a threadbare carpet were all that furnished the tiny room along with a gate-leg table closed against a wall and covered with a plastic cloth. A curtain was drawn against a space in one wall, presumably to hide the hole-in-the-wall bed. Another curtain half-covered the tiny kitchen space where Will was chinking cups and waiting for the whistling kettle to blow its readiness to fill his waiting teapot. Colin felt as if he had stepped back in time. He'd seen 'single-ends' like this in museums, but never the real thing-not nowadays- and certainly not in daily use. The old range was missing, but an equally antiquated two-bar electric fire was in its place, with the original mantle-piece above it. From what he could see as Will worked in the tiny kitchen, there was an old jaw-box sink and what looked like a very elderly gas cooker. Clearing a space amongst the clutter of papers, Colin squeezed himself onto the couch leaving the fireside chair for Will. He jumped quickly back onto his feet as he saw Will approach with two steaming mugs in rather shaky hands.

"I put some milk in, but I've no sugar. Don't use the stuff since I'm diabetic." Will placed the mug in Colin's hand and laid his own on the floor beside his chair before

42

returning to the kitchen. A moment later he came out with an old sweetie tin, twisted off the lid and offered Colin a biscuit, then took one for himself.

“Thanks,” said Colin.

“Now what brings a lad like you to a place like this?” said Will as he dipped his biscuit in the tea and turned his gaze on Colin.

43

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART TWO THE MAINLAND

A new face at the door

“Well, well, well!” said Chris, “A new face at the door to welcome the great and the good! It’s marvellous to see you Will. Colin said you’d be taking over the reins. But you know that you’re not in charge. She is!” Will followed Chris’s pointing finger and smiled at ER snuggled up on her favourite chair.

“She’s well named that one. I don’t think she’d give up that chair to the Queen herself. I’ve been here a month now and I only get to sit in it when she’s out roving in the early hours. She comes back, plonks herself on an arm and paws me until I get up and move out. She does sometimes let me sit on for a while and sometimes even curls up on my lap. Do you know Chris, she came back the other morning and climbed up and sat on my head! I couldn’t believe it! On my head like a big furry hat she was!” said Will in amazement.

“She used to sit on Billy’s head too!” said Chris and immediately regretted his words as he saw the reaction on Will’s face. But in a moment the sadness was replaced with a growing smile; a cheery smile; a smile that lit up a face so like his son’s that it was almost a reincarnation. Billy was gone but Will was here. Two peas in a pod. The same balding head, the same cherry cheeks, the same singing voice.

“I just love it here lad. I feel so close to Billy at long last. People think I’m him and make me feel so welcome. Every day that passes, I learn something new about my son; walking where he walked; talking to people he knew. I can finally understand why he adored the theatre so much. I’m beginning to feel the same about it myself!” he said with rising emotion.

“You’ll do!” said Chris, “If ER likes you, you’re in with a shout. Now is that good-for-nothing-excuse for a Company Manager in yet?”

“He’s in. Came in about half an hour ago. Said to tell you he’d be front of house until one,” replied Will.

“Thanks Will!” Chris punched in his code, pushed open the door and let himself in. Will returned to his chair and was surprised to see ER sitting on the arm. He leant down and stroked her before tentatively sitting himself down. She purred contentedly as he continued to stroke her fur, then eased herself onto his lap to curl up comfortably. Will looked down on the cat, Billy’s cat, and closed his eyes to stop the surge of sadness spilling into tears. It didn’t work. One or two escaped to roll down his cheeks. He was sitting on Billy’s chair with Billy’s cat on his lap, working in the

place that Billy had loved to work in. His son was dead, But Will was walking in his shoes, living his life and learning more about him than he'd ever done during his lifetime. He was closer now to Billy than he'd ever been and his heart was bursting with love for the son he had never known. Tears rolled over his cheeks and landed on ER's back. Her head turned. Two green eyes looked straight into Will's and he could have sworn the old cat smiled.

"Will? We need you! Have you got a minute?" a voice from the corridor called out. Will recognised Colin's voice and gently stood up lifting ER with him, then returning her

44

to the chair. He shuffled to the stage door and called back.

"Ever Ready! How can I serve?" The words came into his mind and were out before he could think about stopping them. They weren't words he would normally use, but they felt right. Colin popped his head round the corner of the corridor.

"Tea, Will, five minutes?"

45

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART THREE THE ISLAND

Coming Home

Colin watched as the ferry pulled away from the linkspan. He grasped the rail before him and closed his eyes. Pain racked his body, yet the pills prescribed were supposed to ease it. They had at first, but recently their effects had been short-lived. The doctor had suggested an injection, but Colin wasn't prepared to suffer a needle. Needles, or more specifically, one needle had brought him to where he was right now. His shoulders hunched, his head dropped, and he let out a sigh from deep within himself. His eyes opened, but took nothing in. He gripped the rail hard as a spasm shook through him, leaving him drained and hardly able to stand. His fingers lost their grip on the rail and he stumbled sideways. It was all he could do to stop himself falling in a crumpled heap on the deck. After a moment or two the spasm passed, his balance returned and his eyes regained their focus. He leant heavily against the rail until he thought he'd be able to make his way inside. Once there he slumped on one of the recliners and drew comfort from the support it offered his weary body. His gloved hand found the phial of pills in his pocket. He couldn't have any more for at least another hour. He held them. He turned them over in his hand. Release from pain would be his in only an hour from now; sixty minutes to wait until he could take one. He closed his eyelids and counted down the seconds.

He looked at his watch. Fifty-eight minutes to go. Why could these bloody things not work for longer? Why did he have to bear this hellish pain, day in day out? It wouldn't stop. It never seemed to leave him nowadays and there was nothing more

that the docs could do for him.....unless he took the needle. And he would NEVER take the needle.

“Colin?” said a voice appearing above him. “Is it you lad?” the voice of the whitheaded

man seemed rather unsure. Colin’s eyes opened slightly. There was no recognition in them, not a flicker.

“It is you lad. My but you’ve changed a bit since I last saw you,” continued the voice. Colin prised his eyes open and focused on the man. His brain seemed to recall the voice, but couldn’t give him a clear memory of it.

“And you are? “ said Colin working hard to keep his eyes focused on the face under the white crop of hair.

“David. David Boyd. Used to come to your island every year with the Irvings. Stayed at the mill,” the stranger’s voice continued, his face hoping for recognition.

“I remember the Irvings. Used to have great parties when they were over,” said Colin, his mind suddenly clearing, “But I don’t remember you, sorry.”

“Play a banjo. Love the old country and western.” David explained further.

“Ah!” said Colin, “ Mr. Lonnie Donegan!” He did remember him after all.

Thought he was a fantastic banjo player and proceeded to join in with everything, anytime there was a ceilidh. Colin dug deep and smiled.

“We had some grand ceilidhs at the mill!” he said with all the enthusiasm he could muster. Having re-established his acquaintance, David sat down beside Colin and began to recount the adventures of his life over the five or six years since his last visit.

46

Colin switched to automatic pilot and tried to nod and yes and no in some of the right places. Keeping his eyes focused and looking relatively interested wasn’t easy. The time passed. Colin glanced at his watch and noted that he could now safely take another painkiller. A smile of relief spread over his face.

“Excuse me David,” he interrupted the flow of his companion’s rhetoric, “ nature calls! Catch you later.” And with that he fled to the relative safety of the toilet. Once inside the cubicle, he leant against the door, let out a sigh of relief and reached for his pills.

Returning to the lounge, he slipped through the cafeteria without being seen by the banjo player, and climbed the stairs to the open deck above. Breathless after the climb, he once again clung to the rails and waited. It came. That easing of pain crept through his body and made him feel human again. He relaxed against the railing and viewed the scene being unfurled by the evaporating mist. He knew this scene well. A glow from deep within spread to his already flushed cheeks. He laughed aloud, lifted his woolly hat and waved it for all he was worth. They were too far out

for anyone to see him yet, but what the hell. He was nearlt home, and that was such a good feeling. He closed his eyes to try to stop the tears that gathered from falling. He was home, probably for the last time.

47

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART THREE THE ISLAND

Telling

Donald watched as his cousin came towards him, and felt a massive wave of sadness wash over him. He knew what his cousin was bearing at the moment, a secret between them and one other, a trio of disbelief, considering what they knew would be the outcome. That was how Colin wanted it to be, until he was ready to say what had to be said and do what had to be done. And they had agreed to his wishes, he and Chris, what else could they do?

Donald continued to observe as Colin bent to toss a small stone into the calmness of the loch, then sit close to the edge, his feet crossed under him, as he watched the rippling effect of his disturbance.

“Last a long time don’t they, the ripples,” said Donald as he stood beside Colin’s seated form.

“Indeed they do!” answered Colin without looking up, “A stone cast into the water of life takes only moments to return to where it came from. From life to source through a moment of time. A flicker on the surface that disappears to the unseen depths below.”

Colin lifted another stone and threw it further into the loch. Donald sat down and together they watched in silence as it made its impact, rippling gentle waves towards them and away from them.

“You miss the stone, but its ripples are there to see for such a long time afterwards,” said Donald quietly. Colin’s head fell forwards into his hands for a moment, where he carefully massaged his forehead with his fingers. His words were quiet as he began to speak.

“I can manage the pain and the illness, and I’m getting used to the idea of not being here, but I just don’t know how I’m going to tell mum.....After dad.....” his voice halted as he seemed unable to find any more words. Donald placed a hand on his cousin’s shoulder and waited until Colin was able to continue.

“I blame myself for that. Dad only went out onto the cliffs because we’d had that hellish row. I should have stopped him. If I hadn’t told him about me and Chris, he’d maybe have been here today. Can you see why I’m so scared to tell? Telling seems to cause so much harm. Maybe it’s better not to tell, just to let what will be be, and have an end to it. I should just go back to the mainland, pop my clogs, and nobody would be any the wiser!” His voice rose with the emotion he was feeling and

exploded through his words. He tossed another stone into the loch. Donald kept his hand firmly on his cousin's shoulder and began to speak in a challenging tone. "I didn't take you for a coward!" Colin's face shot round to stare at him incredulously.

"Was I a coward when I told my dad that I was gay?" he challenged.

48

"No. You were no coward, but when you told him, and how you told him could have been better," replied Donald. He didn't want to take Colin along this painful path, but he knew he must.

"So I made a mistake. I expected immediate acceptance. I was happy, so I expected him to be happy for me. I'd found the love of my life, and just because it was another man, my father couldn't take it!" Colin vented his anger loudly, " and he went out and killed himself!"

"You know that wasn't the case!" Donald interjected immediately. Uncle Ross slipped and fell. The fall killed him. It was an accident for God's sake!"

"Yes but I caused the accident. If I hadn't told him....." His words ended in a whimper.

"So that's why you're afraid of telling Auntie Flora now." Donald pulled his cousin's shoulder round so that he could see his face. His words were gentle as he spoke softly.

"This is not about how you live your life, this is about your life as it is now. It's going to end sooner than it should. You know that and I know that. Auntie Flora needs to know that too so that the time you have left together is well spent. She needs time to get used to the idea of you not being around. She needs time to plan her goodbyes just as you do.....just as we all do." Donald's voice faltered momentarily then continued. "Your dad loved you and everything about you. Yes he had difficulty handling your choice of lifestyle, but he'd have got there in time. We all need time to adjust to change. Your problem is, my dear cousin, and it's one of the things that everyone loves about you, is that you expect everyone to move into change and embrace it now, not in a day or a week or a month, but NOW!" Colin lifted his face to look Donald and smiled weakly.

"I do kind of live for the minute don't I? Life in the theatre kind of gets you to see things that way," he almost laughed. Some of the tension seemed to have eased out of Colin's body. He straightened his shoulders, gave his head a few turns around his neck, stretched his legs in front of him, then tossed another stone into the water. Both he and Donald watched as once again the ripples spread out in concentric circles around it. Colin rose to his feet and spoke firmly.

"I'll tell her. I'll find the time and the place and I'll tell mum. I'll do it soon. I'll do

it today. I'll give her time to come to terms with it just as I'm doing." Donald raised himself to his feet, looked at his cousin's determined face and knew that he would do as he said.

"Today would be good. Always a good day, a Sunday." He said watching his words raise a wide smile on Colin's face. "Help the old man to his feet now, there's a good lad!"

Colin stretched out his hand and pulled his cousin up from the ground. Donald held onto the hand and covered it with his other one. "Yes. Today would be good," he repeated.

Moments later, from the track above, Donald turned to watch as a burst of sunshine emerged from parting clouds. Below him on the track he saw a figure begin to climb onto the road beyond. A gentle whistling reached him as he saw the figure stride on with head held high. Colin was never down for long. It was just as well that he had

49

such a remarkable spirit. When he was well out of sight, Donald eased himself wearily onto a grassy bank. His body began to shake as emotions surged through him.

50

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART THREE THE ISLAND

Never Parted

Flora pulled some withered petals from the fuchsia bush that was growing nicely despite its wild location. Hardy specimens, Ross used to call them, but they were his favourites. His own croft garden was full of them. Not content with hedging them, he'd grown them in delightful clumps all round the house that had been his father's and grandfather's before him. He loved the hanging bell-like flowers and used to say that it felt like Christmas every day when they were in full bloom, with not one but dozens of Christmas trees.

Flora stepped back from the bush that had grown up one side of Ross's head-stone. She read the words and wept silently, letting the tears fall unhindered over the cheeks of her pretty face. She still couldn't believe that he was gone; he felt so close, especially here in this quiet spot. That's why she came every week after church, to have a blether and to feel his presence near her. It was almost like the way she talked to God, but it was different. She didn't shout at God as she did at Ross. God felt out there and all around, but Ross felt within her, part of her, her other half.

She began to speak to that other half in her native Gaelic, as she gently brushed the surface of the stone with her hand. She was on her knees now, speaking in an intimate whisper. All that had happened in the last day poured from her lips. She spoke of Colin's return home; of his frightening appearance and of the terrible vacant

look in his eyes. Her voice rose a little as she expressed her concerns about the cause of his fragile appearance, then calmed as something inside seemed to reassure that all would be well.

She was still kneeling and speaking gently as a hand pushed open the gate of the graveyard. Flora didn't look up. She knew that he'd come, Ross had told her so only moments ago. A gentle touch on her shoulder silenced her voice. A figure crouched on his knees beside her and wrapped an arm round her shoulders. It was time. Time to tell both of them, here, together. Time to release those closely held fears into the care of the two who had loved him longest. Time to leave the anguish of the past behind. It was time. Time to face up to what would be.

Colin held his mother close as they each rested a hand on either corner of the headstone. And then he began.

51

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART THREE THE ISLAND

News travels fast

Mary opened the letter with the postmark from home, relishing what lay inside. She spoke most weeks to family at home on the phone, but a letter was different. She could read it over and over, savouring each word, transporting herself to that special place from where it had come. It was a long one this time, four or five pages of Meg's lovely handwriting. She was glad that Meg was the one who wrote and not her dear cousin Donald. His writing was an illegible scrawl, it always had been, even at school. Maybe part of it was because his natural left-handedness wasn't allowed to be. He'd been forced to write with his right hand, something that could never happen today. When she thought of her wee grand-daughter and the easy time she had using her left hand so naturally, a frown crossed her face. Schooldays for Katie were not quite like those she had experienced herself, and that was most certainly something to be thankful for.

With the letter in one hand and a cup of tea in the other, Mary began to read.

There was good and bad, and as usual Meg tried to save the better news until last.

Mary read the first page, read it again, then reached for the phone.

Chris was preparing some photographs to be sent off to his agent, when he heard the phone in the study ring twice then ring off. He raced to pick it up and re-dialled. It was Colin. They always used this special way of letting each other know who was ringing. The phone was answered immediately.

"I've told," Colin spoke first.

"All of them?" questioned Chris.

"All of them. It was easier than I thought after Donald challenged me, but at least they now know."

“And how do you feel about it?” Chris asked gently.

“Relieved, and thankful. I feel I can breathe again.” Colin continued.

“So are we sticking to our plan?” enquired Chris with a hint of concern.

“I’ll stay as long as I need to, then I’ll be home with you,” Colin said flatly.

“Stay as long as it takes, longer if you need to. I’ll be waiting. Love you,” Chris said and hung up.

Chris slumped in the chair and let his head fall back. Minutes passed as thoughts raced through his mind. Telling them had been hard, and he hadn’t been allowed to be there. They’d agreed that when they’d decided how to proceed. His presence might not have helped, so he stayed away. It wasn’t easy for him to be on the other side of the water. But at least it had been done now and the time ahead would be a little easier... until. He opened his eyes and shook his head to try to blot out the until. There were some things that he still had to get used to. But they were a while

52

away. They wouldn’t happen until...until Colin came back, sooner rather than later. Oh how he longed for it to be sooner.

Rising from the chair, he straightened the picture of the two of them on his desk and headed for the kitchen. He had empty jars in the cupboard waiting for a new batch of marmalade. And marmalade was one of Colin’s favourite things ever. He rattled them out from under the sink and dropped them in a basin. Momentarily his mind filled with the dreaded until, then he cast it out with a good shake of his head. No more thoughts of until. He’d get Colin home and settled. Until would come in its own time but it wouldn’t be for a while. His heart lightened at the thought of Colin home again and he began to sing.

Kirsty knocked and walked in. You didn’t stand and wait to be asked at an island door, especially not at the door of one of your longest oldest friends.

“Morning Flora,” called Kirsty as she entered the warmth of the kitchen and proceeded through to the small sitting room. She found Flora on her knees setting the fire.

“Put the kettle on and we’ll have a cup of tea,” said Flora, “and I’ll finish this.”

Kirsty returned to the kitchen, filled the kettle with fresh water and set it on a gas burner to boil. She found mugs and was adding sugar and milk to them when Flora appeared beside her. Kirsty put down the spoon in her hand and wrapped her arms around her friend, letting go reluctantly as the kettle began to whistle.

“You go and sit through and I’ll bring the tea when it’s ready,” said Kirsty. Within minutes they were sitting on either side of the fireplace, mug in hand.

“So tell me about that boy of yours,” said Kirsty gently.

Flora burst into tears.

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART THREE THE ISLAND

Reaction

It was Monday morning. The shop was busy with last-minute posting and the boat was on her way, given the activity at the pier. Donald pulled his thoughts into focus as he took in the scene before him. It would be easy to walk past and ignore what was happening inside the little building, to take to the path over the hill and avoid the reaction that was being displayed. But that wasn't Donald's way. These were his folks; his relatives; his friends; his parishioners. Some of them he didn't like, and some of them he knew reciprocated, but he had a duty to them and to Colin to face them and support them, particularly when times were difficult. And you couldn't get more difficult than today and now. Donald laid aside his personal feelings and went inside.

A handful of island folk were chatting. Their voices were quiet, their faces serious. As Donald's presence became evident their chattering stopped and all eyes sought his. Moments passed and no word was exchanged. The silence amongst them was heavily laden with sadness, fear and concern. Donald's mind quickly acknowledged that Colin's promise of the previous day had been fulfilled, and his face grew the lines of worry as an image of his friend appeared before him. Telling Flora must have been so very, very hard. Donald winced at the thought of it.

"Will we have him long?" Duncan's soft voice reached out of the silence. No-one else spoke. Donald cleared his throat and answered equally quietly.

"Long enough," he said with feeling. Alarmed glances were exchanged.

"And is the rumour true?" said Cathy pausing as Donald raised his eyes to hers, "that he'll not be here when he's at his worst?" Her face was drawn into troubled lines; hurt was deeply evident in her eyes. She was the district nurse and from her expression, seemed to know nothing about Colin's current state of health. Donald met her eyes and softened his expression.

"He knows he'd have the very best of care here Cathy, but he's chosen to go away. He thinks that will be best fore him and for everyone here, and we have to accept and respect his wishes." Donald tried to make his words compassionate, though the message in them caused Cathy and the few folk around her obvious distress.

"Flora will be going with him." Angus expressed the statement as a question. Puzzlement was displayed on his weather-beaten features as he saw Donald shake his head negatively. Intakes of breath and murmurs of disbelief shot amongst the gathered group.

"He's going alone." Donald's words, along with the manner in which he spoke them, created a silence in the tiny room. He looked at each pair of eyes in turn and

let the significance of them sink in, and then he continued.

“He wants us all, and that includes Flora, to remember him as he is now.”

Forcing a smile onto his face, Donald passed over his letter for posting, made his lips form the word “cheery” and made for the door. He almost collided with Old Lachie as they both came upon the narrow entrance at the same moment. Donald saw the

54

look on his old friend’s face, took his arm and guided him outside to lean against his old maestro car. Behind them, voices were beginning to respond what had just passed between them.

Understanding

“You know about Colin?” said Donald. He watched as Lachie’s face furrowed with lines of sadness.

“Aye. Flora told me herself, yesterday,” he responded, “It’ll take a bit of getting used to. He’s a young lad to be facing his end so soon,” continued Lachie slowly.

“And so soon after Ross.....,” his voice faltered as emotion sought to overwhelm him.

Donald opened the car door and encouraged Lachie to sit inside. He closed the door and moved round to the passenger side. He grasped the door handle and pulled. It remained firmly closed. He tapped on the window and Lachie reached over to give the door a good push from the inside. With a creak it yielded. Donald cranked it open enough to let himself in, and sat down.

“I’ve some oil in my shed, if that’d help,” he said carefully NOT closing the door again, but leaving it a fraction open.

“No need to waste good oil on an old door! It works!” said Lachie, “you just have to have the knack of it!” responded Lachie with a grin that pleased Donald’s eye. But the grin was replaced almost immediately with a look of concern that sprung right from the centre of the old man’s being. Both men sat for a moment in silence then Lachie turned, his face troubled, and the questions began. Donald knew this would happen. People would come to him to ask rather than go to Colin. That was human nature. There was something about facing a person with a terminal illness that brought out the coward in all of us. Donald accepted it and was determined to support Colin by answering as much as he could without breaking any confidences. They had already agreed that he could and should. And so he answered, giving Lachie as much information as he dared.

“Bit of a black picture,” said Lachie as his questions ceased.

“I’m afraid it is,” said Donald cheerlessly.

“Months you say,” said Lachie matter-of-factly, his head shaking from side to side as Donald affirmed with a shake of his head.

“Well, we’ve got to make those months ones to remember,” said Lachie straightening himself in his seat. Donald reached across and gently laid a hand on his old friend’s arm.

“He won’t be here for those months, at least not all of them.” Lachie’s face turned sharply towards Donald, a look of disbelief in his eyes.

“But this is his home. He can’t go away to die on his own on the mainland.” He said incredulously, “And what about Flora?”

“This is his choice Lachie. We have to respect his wishes. He doesn’t want us to see how it ends for him. He’s finding it hard enough to face the end, himself.”

Donald’s words were gentle, but he could see each and every one of them hurting as they were delivered into his old friend’s consciousness.

55

“But he’ll surely let Flora go to see him when he’s in hospital!” Lachie exclaimed, looking at Donald for confirmation.

“She’s his mother for God’s sake!” he exploded.

“And you’re his uncle and I’m his cousin, but he wants to be on his own when he reaches the end.” Donald spoke slowly emphasising every word.

“But you’re his minister too!” said Lachie confused by Colin’s extreme desire to be alone.

“That may be, but he doesn’t want me there in either capacity,” said Donald flatly. Lachie used the following moments of silence to gather his thoughts. His voice was deliberately serious as he turned to face Donald with another question.

“You say he wants to be on his own at the end. Does that mean that he wants noone at all with him? No-one, not even....” Lachie stopped as Donald’s eyes responded with an unspoken question, and then continued.

“Yes. I know. I’ve known Colin all of his life and I know everything about him. Flora doesn’t know, but I know. Ross told me. So he won’t be entirely alone. He will have someone.” Lachie’s voice faded into the distance as Donald, shaken by this revelation, let his thoughts conjure with what he had just heard. He hadn’t realised that Lachie was aware of Colin’s mainland lifestyle. He was further shaken by the fact that Ross had obviously known before that fateful night when he’d fallen from the cliff to his death. So he had known BEFORE Colin told him. But how could he have? Who else? Donald’s thoughts were interrupted by yet another question from Lachie.

“How long?” he asked abruptly, “ Flora couldn’t tell me.”

“Three months if he’s lucky, two if he’s not,” said Donald still perturbed with what had gone before.

“And how long will he be here, at home?” Lachie ventured after taking in Donald’s

last answer with a slump of his shoulders.

“He’s here until the end of the month, three more weeks,” said Donald with a deep sigh.

They sat with the shock of what had passed between, reluctant to say more, each man trying to comprehend his own thoughts, whilst attempting to hold the turmoil of emotions ready to erupt, at bay. Lachie was the one to break the suffocating silence. “So we can give him three weeks. Well if that’s all there is, we better get to it and give him the best three weeks to remember us by when he.....when he.....”

Lachie couldn’t continue. Tears threatened his cheeks as his eyes filled too quickly. Donald squeezed his arm then let himself out of the car quickly. By the time he had passed around the bonnet, Lachie’s window was being wound down.

“Think I’ll go home for a bit Donald. The shop can wait,” said Lachie with a measure of composure regained.

“Sure you’ll be OK?” said Donald.

“I’ll be fine once I get my head round all of it,” he paused for a moment then continued, “And then.....and then, we’ll get our minds focused on the next three weeks!” he finished firmly. With that he encouraged his old maestro to respond and reversed out to turn and head for home.

56

Donald watched as the old car made its noisy way along the road. He breathed deeply and closed his eyes tightly trying to remember all that had just been said. He hadn’t broken any confidences. He hadn’t betrayed Colin, but someone had. He was still wrestling with Lachie’s revelation, when voices from the doorway of the shop prompted his feet to move him away from further discussions. He found himself on the track behind the shop. It would lead him to a place of quiet solitude where he could regain a measure of composure before making a visit to Flora, something he was dreading, but something he had to do today.

“God, this is hard!” the words burst from his lips as he walked.

57

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART THREE THE ISLAND

Preparing to leave

Another shower threw itself at the little window panes. They resisted and forced the drops to slither downwards after impact. Some held tight; forced their wetness to form bigger shapes, until it was too full to cling on, too much to bear the weight of water. Colin watched as the shower passed and the drops were left on the glass; reflectors now of the coming calm; the after-storm reminders of what had been, and might come again.

Tears. Too many tears had been shed, and it was still not over. It had barely begun.

He looked at his mother as she dozed on her fireside chair. The strain from the last few weeks was etched in lines across her forehead, although her cheeks retained their usual cheery colour. Her eyelids moved often, indicating that she wasn't asleep, at least not yet. Thoughts would be keeping her conscious. Too many thoughts. But at least he'd given her all the answers to the questions she'd asked. Each answer had been painfully received, especially the one about his wishes for the end. His eyes closed as his mind swam over the word end, looking at it from all sides. It had been really difficult for him to make the decision he had. He knew what he'd be like as the end came, and he didn't want anyone who loved him to retain their last image of him in such a state; even although he'd been told that peace came, and that could be a great comfort to the ones who witnessed it. No. The end would have to be his end and his alone.

A gentle breathing alerted him to his mother's change of state. He looked over and noted that sleep had overcome her. For once in the last week or so, she seemed to be resting peacefully. Quietly he eased himself out of his chair, cringing as a raft of pain swept through his body. He stood for a moment to let it pass, then moved towards his mother. Very gently he re-arranged the half-fallen knee-rug over her. His hand swept over her hair in a light caress and she stirred a little.

"Just going out for a wee breath of air, mum. I'll be back in an hour," he whispered.

"Mm....mm...." Flora appeared not to want to waken, and for that Colin was relieved. She needed to sleep. Neither of them had slept much recently. She would be the better of it. Checking that the fire was well stoked, and the guard was safely over it, he eased his way to the door and let himself out without disturbing her further. On the notice-board in the kitchen, he wrote a few words, just in case she would waken before he returned, then he gathered his warm fleece and his hat and went out.

It was the time he liked to be out; that time when the sun had just set and darkness had begun its creep to meet the day. The gloaming brought with it a stillness; an invitation to rest the eyes from the glare of sunshine and accustom them to the coming darkness. Colin reassured himself of the torch in his pocket and began to walk. He was slow and stiff. His legs were reluctant to propel him at first, but soon, a steady pace moved him forward with reasonable ease. Up the road and into the track above the loch, he walked, knowing every rock and bush on the way. He couldn't

58

count the number of times he'd walked this path. It seemed he'd been walking it forever. Breathing deeply, he strode on, ignoring the whispers of pain that would soon turn to shouts.

It was autumn, the quickest season of the year, here, in the place of his birth and

boyhood. Vibrant colours could still be seen, caught in the flare that was left at the sun's departing. It smelled like autumn; that mixture of cool, mingled with the fragrances of final blooming was unmistakeable. Listening to the water of the loch ebbing against the reed-bank, evoked warm memories. An occasional plop drew his eyes to the surface of the water, where a widening set of circles marked the presence of a fish below—one that had surfaced momentarily to see what was happening. Colin smiled and remembered the countless times he and his father had sat there on the loch-side waiting for a bite. His father's face appeared before him, smiling. Colin couldn't hear what he was saying, but he was animated and enthusiastic. Then, he disappeared. Colin closed his eyes tightly trying to recapture the image, but it was gone. He waited for it to reappear, but this time it didn't. Often it did. Recently, images of his father had been appearing and re-appearing rather a lot. When he opened his eyes again, night had raced into what had remained of the day. He pulled his torch from his pocket and flicked it on. Immediately he felt the warmth of it as it lit the space around him. He let it lead him on towards the hill track, over the old road, then down into the glen. Blackness filled the hollow. Not a glimmer of daylight reached it, especially not at this time of day. Following the twists and turns of the sheep track, he continued downwards, flicking off the beam of his torch as he reached a plateau. It was pitch black. He let his eyes adjust to the dark and lay down, his back cushioned in an initially prickly bush of heather. He eased his body into the depths of the bush and let himself relax. He closed his eyes and let the darkness cover him.

He lay, letting the stillness of the night seep into his fretful body. Thoughts of today and yesterday flew off with the bats, to rest in the eaves of a nearby barn. A familiar sound, very distant at the moment, raised a smile to his lips. Alistair was on his way to the pub. He'd be a while yet, for he liked to travel slowly. There was no mistaking the noise of his old car, a vintage piece, in which he travelled at a rate that allowed him time to appreciate the scenery, or so he claimed. A shudder of discomfort passed over him and he moved onto his side to ease it. He sensed a small creature, probably a vole or field-mouse close-by; its scurrying was probably caused by his own sideways movement. He tried to turn onto his back again, grimacing with pain as he stretched out his unwilling body below him. He lay very still until the pain had eased to an ache. The ache was familiar. It was with him every waking moment. It was getting worse, though the pills still helped. At the moment they did, but it wouldn't be for much longer. He had been warned of that. He knew that very soon their effects would be short-lived. He could manage with them, and when they were of no use, he would manage without them.

He released his thoughts to the darkness and closed his mind to the pain.

Blinking open his eyes, he gasped inwardly. No matter how often he did this, the magnificence of what appeared before him always took his breath away. The lights of the night were switched on. Tiny spotlights penetrated the blackness in emerging patterns that Colin could recognise. He lay in awe of the vastness of the universe as 59

more and more became visible. Star after star made its appearance in the backdrop of night. Colin marvelled at their power, wondered at their energy. He thought of how far away they were from him and shook his head. A nursery rhyme popped into his head and he sang its words out loud. He smiled at its simple lyric.

“Twinkle twinkle little star....” His eyes focused on a group of stars and his mind took him onto the stage, where a blackout had just led into a lighting change. Colin saw the floodlit stage before him and recognised some of the actors. One particular face drew him to it. He grinned as he saw the eyes. His heart filled as he recognised the depth of love in them. He reached inside his fleece and pulled out his phone. As he flicked it open, light illuminated its small screen. Seconds later, he had found the number and dialled it. He began to release the events of the day.

As he replaced the phone in its cradle, Chris stretched his long limbs towards the roaring fire and invited Star to come closer. The dog curled herself close and placed her head on his knee. Chris stroked her ears and the top of her head as they sat comfortable together watching the flames leap from reddening coals. Colin had insisted that they kept the old coal fire when they had bought the cottage, and now Chris was glad of it. Colin said it reminded him of home and gave off a much better heat than electric or gas fires. At the time, Chris had argued about the dust and cleaning and setting of it, but now that he was used to it, he wouldn’t have anything said against it. The warmth of it was worth all the effort. Star’s head turned as Chris moved his arm to stroke her again. Brown eyes met his as he whispered the words that he’d waited to say for such a long time.

“Colin’s coming home!” He said it again and again, raising the emotion in his voice each time. Star’s tail began to wag and she reached out to lick Chris’s hand. “You know what I’m saying, don’t you!” said Chris smiling broadly as the little dog jumped onto the floor and raced to the door, wagging her tail and looking back at Chris expectantly. Chris smiled and knelt down to pull the wee dog into a huge cuddle.

“He’s coming home Star. He’s coming home!

60

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART THREE THE ISLAND

A final fling

Colin pulled up the sleeve of his shaking arm and waited. Doctor Jeremy had the

needle ready primed.

“You’re sure you want this?” he asked for the second time.

“Yes,” said Colin firmly, “I need it to get me through tonight and tomorrow in style.”

Meg opened the oven door and lifted out the tray of sausage rolls. Browned to perfection they had risen beautifully into mouth-sized parcels. She transferred them on to the cooling rack and viewed the assortment of goodies on her kitchen table. She’d been baking all morning and was well pleased with the result. A scone had decided it liked the company of pancakes better and had fallen into their ranks.

Meg’s hand lifted it and put it back where it belonged. She focused momentarily on it. It was a treacle scone. Colin loved treacle scones.

Lachie pulled on a couple of notches of his handbrake and opened the driver’s door of his old maestro. He got out and reached over into the back. A battered black case in the shape of a fiddle lay there. He lifted it out, and as his hands touched the case, he felt an old longing stir in him. He hadn’t played his fiddle in years, at least not in public. Tonight he would. He let himself into the hall and closed the door behind him. A few hours of practice would help, and tonight he would play again. He’d play for Colin.

Kirsty lifted the lid of her biggest pot and checked the level of boiling water once again. She reached for her kettle and poured a little into the pot, avoiding the extra steam that it immediately created. Replacing the lid carefully, she returned to her sitting room and looked at the clock. Another hour should do it. She sat down and lifted her knitting onto her lap. Another few rounds of decreases and then the hat would be ready to have its crown grafted. She knitted on and the time passed.

Checking the clock, she returned to the cooker and raised the lid. The shape and smell told her that the dumpling was ready. She turned off the gas and began to lift the steaming bundle out of the pot. Untying the string with care, she eased back the cloot and smiled to herself. It was ready. Further deft movements, learned over the years, persuaded the cloot to leave the dumpling whole and unbroken, its skin perfect. With a plate on top, she overturned the dumpling and removed the cloot at its base. She viewed what was left with approval. The dumpling was perfect; a clootie dumpling as good as any she’d made before. Colin loved clootie dumpling. He especially loved her clootie dumpling.

61

Flora sat at the kitchen table rubbing. Her hands had a cloth in them and she was rubbing an object inside the cloth with careful strokes. She lifted the small object after further rubbing and examined it. Its surface caught the light and shone. She looked into its face, saw her own reflection and beamed. The little watch was cleaned

to perfection. She picked it up by its edges and turned it over. The back was flawless; not a scratch or dent to be seen. It was as good as the day her grandfather had bought it and that was nearly a century ago. Flora checked that it was wound and showing the correct time, then placed it in the little wooden box that her grandfather had made for it all those years ago. She looked at it nestled on the little piece of soft cloth and smiled. It had been in that box for too many years. It needed to be used, and she knew just the person who would use it. As she was replacing the lid of the box, light sparkled from the tiny diamond on the ring Ross had given to her years after they were married. She always wore it next to her wedding ring. It meant so much to her because of the way Ross had presented it to her. She remembered the day he had come home from the mainland full of excitement, and whisked her off for a picnic on their favourite island beach. It had been a glorious day, and a very romantic one. Ross had been bubbling over with excitement as he brought out the ring and placed it on her finger. Flora looked at the ring again then raised her eyes to Ross's picture on the mantelpiece. His smile met hers and she laughed out loud.

“Quite the romantic my lad!” she said as her eyes looked at the face she had loved all her life. Tears began to edge the blueness of her eyes. Gently, she slipped the little ring over her knuckle and held it in the palm of her right hand. She traced a finger round its edge and thought of Ross's arms that had always formed a safe circle around her. She raised her eyes to the picture again.

“Should I?” she said, and immediately felt the sureness of a response. Picking up the ring, she placed it inside the little box, hidden amongst the cloth, beside the gold fob watch. She took time to replace the lid as tears fell unchecked from her eyes. Ross's watery image appeared before her and she listened. Her heart felt his nearness and it too heard the words that would help her get through today and tomorrow. Her lips trembled as she tried to smile. She placed the little box and its contents beside Ross's picture and whispered.

“I'm going to lose my boy tomorrow, but I know he'll soon be in the safest of hands.”

62

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART THREE THE ISLAND

Farewell

There was a buzz about the place today. Donald could feel it as he made his way to the pier shed. Waves of laughter met him as he entered. Neil was holding court as he usually did, and those gathered round were doubled up at his antics. He caught sight of Donald and roared a welcome.

“That was a ceilidh in a million last night Donald lad. The best one we've had in years!” Donald smiled at the memory of it and joined the group.

“I thought I was going to end myself when Colin danced Kirsty’s dumpling round the floor with his new woolly hat on it!” he said laughing heartily, “and when it slipped off the plate and landed right in Angus’s lap! It was as well he was wearing his kilt, for with breeks on he’d have found it a bit too hot to handle!”

“Wasn’t it rare to hear Old Lachie on his fiddle again?” said Andrew, “It’s been years since he’s played, though he hasn’t lost his touch, not one finger of it! Marvellous!”

“Duncan fairly ripped out the tunes on his box. I could hardly keep pace with that Strip the Willow, and as for the schottische!” exclaimed Peter, “it was feet-tied-inknots

kind of speed!” Laughter spread through the group again encouraging others outside the shed to look in. The gathering was growing as it did on boat days. Donald excused himself and went outside to look for Meg. Finding her amongst a group of women, he caught her eye and made his way towards her. They too were remembering the ceilidh of the night before.

“Wasn’t it good to see Ella there?” said Megan, “She doesn’t usually come to ceilidhs, but last night was an exception.”

“It was good to see Johnny there too. And see him dance. I didn’t think he still could!” said Catriona.

“He can do more than dance!” said Eve, “When he was doing the St Bernard’s with me, his hand slipped down and pinched my bottom!”

“There’s life in the old dog yet!” said Kirsty spotting Donald’s approach and winking at him.

“I may wear a dog collar, but I’m not an old dog yet, at least not yet anyway!” said Donald returning Kirsty’s wink.

“You certainly were no old anything last night!” said Janet smiling broadly at Donald. “The way you managed that Barn Dance, reminded me of Callum, God Bless him. We used to dance that at every ceilidh. It was our favourite!”

The sound of a car horn blaring for all it was worth drew their attention to the hill road approaching the pier. A wee red car was coming down it at a fair lick with lights blazing and a waving figure hanging half out of its sun-roof. Donald cast his eyes back to the pier and noticed the boat not more than five minutes from berthing.

“Right on time, Colin!” he thought to himself.

Laughter erupted in huge waves from the gathered groups at the pier as the wee red car came closer, making even more noise. A bugle sounded above the car horn, a

63

very badly played bugle, which sent hands to ears as the cacophony of discordant sound blared out.

Tears of laughter rolled down the faces of those watching as Colin got out of the car in full dress kilt (with his new woolly hat on his head) and began to dance his mother Flora towards the pier. Duncan appeared with his box and soon everyone who could, was dancing, and everyone who couldn't stood and clapped. The dancers danced down the pier towards the boat as others followed, still clapping. The music stopped, but the clapping continued. Everyone clapped as Colin, still blowing his blessed bugle disappeared up the gangway and onto the open deck. Still the clapping continued. Tear-filled eyes watched as the boat was untied, and hands still clapped. Colin dropped his bugle and raised his hat in his hand to wave. The clapping stopped and hands were raised to wave. They were still waving as the boat became a tiny speck on the horizon.

Donald and Flora remained on the pier until everyone else had gone. The boat, with its precious cargo, was no longer to be seen- vanished from their horizons. Donald could sense Flora's release. He felt it under the arm that he had wrapped around her. Crumpling, as the sobbing began, her whole slight body shook. His other arm reached forward to encircle her. Days, weeks and months of fear and tension began to release their grip, as Flora allowed her grief to begin its awful journey through her being.

No-one came near, though many eyes witnessed the pair clinging together in their solitary position. Eyes that shone tears of regret and disbelief that such a young man, a special young man, one of them, would never be in their midst again. Those many eyes turned away, left the pier and were soon focusing on the road home. Silence descended where minutes earlier there had been a lively meeting place, albeit a sad one. The boat had gone and the island was settling back into itself.

Flora was now still. Her sobbing had become a gentle pulse after the violent wave that it had been. Donald still held her; his arms still encircled her fragility, until she gently raised hers to push him away a little. Her tear-stained face attempted a smile as she looked up into his face. She said nothing. Nothing needed to be said, their eyes mirrors of their feelings. Releasing one arm, Donald lifted one of Flora's into his and together they walked the length of the pier. The steps allowed each to seek the comfort of their own thoughts.

By the time they reached Donald's car, there was not another soul to be seen. It was as if there had never been a boat. It was as if Colin had not been whisked away from their presence. Donald opened the passenger door, saw Flora safely seated inside, and then settled himself behind the wheel. He was about to turn the ignition key to wake up the engine, when Flora's hand on his arm stopped his action.

"Do you think....." she began falteringly, "I know he said we shouldn't....No we can't." Her head dropped onto her chest and a hand crept up to wipe a new springing

of tears.

“Flora. You are his mother. Colin has made his wishes known and we must respect them.” Donald paused to seek his next words with care. He turned towards his passenger and took one of her hands in both of his own.

64

“You and I have seen death before. Too many times it has been shocking and almost too painful to bear. We’ve borne it and will no doubt have to bear it again. We can’t avoid it. If we love, as we do, it hurts when people we love are taken from us.” Donald paused and waited for the rising emotion to pass before continuing. “Colin has asked us to let him die away from here so that we don’t have to witness the shell that he fears he will become...” Flora winced at his words and drew frightened eyes up to look into his.

“His dying will not be easy to watch. Chris will have a very difficult time over the next month or so. I know that. You know that, though I fear he may not himself.”

Donald continued allowing his tone to lighten a little.

“In all of Colin’s planning, he hasn’t allowed for the effect it will have on Chris. He’s on his own and he’ll need support too.” Donald looked down at Flora’s hand in his and squeezed.

“Colin might not like it, but I think we should be there for Chris.”

A tiny glimmer of hope sparked in Flora’s eyes. All was not lost. It would be very hard to bear, but she might see her boy again, one more time.

65

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART FOUR THE MAINLAND

A Month of Waiting

Time was against them. Each day was precious. Its minutes needed to be lived and lived to the full. So many of those minutes and hours would pass in pain for both of them, as one bore it and the other watched its bearing. They were determined to make the most of it. And so they began.

Day One

Today Colin wanted to go on the open-topped bus around this city which he knew so well. He’d never done the trip before, always wanted to, but never found the time or inclination among the buzz that usually surrounded his life and living.

Wrapped warmly, his inevitable toorie on his head, he climbed aboard and managed to pull himself up the stairs one at a time to the open deck above. The bus had travelled a few hundred yards along Argyle Street before his breathing returned to normal and he could turn his attention to the landmarks being pointed out by the on-board courier. It was cold, even although it was early spring, and it was almost noon. Grey clouds clustered together blocking out the warmth that lay beyond. Colin

shivered a little and turned up his collar. Chris, sitting beside him, looked a little concerned.

“Maybe we should go downstairs, at least until the sun comes out?” he said trying to hide the concern in his voice.

“Not at all. Sunnysides will be all over us soon. Anyway, if you think I’m going all the way down just to come back up again. Mind you the exercise might warm us. Shall we do it?” Colin said, beginning to raise himself from his seat.

“You’re ok. Sit down. We’ll be warm in a minute if you’ve anything to do with it. Here!” Chris pulled some things out of his small rucksack and planted them in Colin’s lap. “Sure you want to do this?”

“I will if you will!!” replied Colin with a twinkle in his eyes.

Minutes later, wearing clown wigs and masks, the pair of them were spinning plastic plates on top of rods much to the amusement of passengers behind them and pedestrians on the streets through which the bus was passing. Once spinning at speed, they took it in turns to stand and sit, then pass the plates onto two other rods. Applause greeted their efforts. Fellow passengers turned to smile and laugh at their antics, encouraging them to stand and walk up and down the passageway when the bus was stationary. Cheers rang out from their street audience as the pair were spotted. Ever theatrical, Colin pretended to lose his plate over the side of the bus. Hands waiting to catch it were amazed, when, almost in their clutches, it miraculously returned to its owner via the long piece of gut attached to the rod. (You didn’t work in the theatre for years and not learn a couple of tricks of the trade). Laughter and smiles greeted a repeat of the antic until, with deep bows, the pair removed their wigs and masks and re-claimed their seats.

66

“I’ve always wanted to be a busker. A busker on a bus is QUITE different!” said Colin still enthralled by their performance. Chris enjoyed the moment. Colin’s face was radiant. The true performer, in his element, was entertaining his public.

They sat for the remainder of the tour enjoying the sunshine that had at long last emerged from behind the curtain of grey. By the time they descended the stairs and made their way off the bus, it was lunchtime. A nearby pub beckoned, one they knew well. An hour later, they hailed a taxi and headed for home. By the time they had climbed the flight of stairs to their first-floor flat, Colin was exhausted. Once inside, he stumbled into his armchair and was almost instantly asleep. Chris laid a blanket over him and began to tuck it around his legs. As he did so, the legs jerked spasmodically. His arms too became restless and his face lost its peacefulness.

“Can I give you something?” he whispered.

“No...No...Nothing,” he muttered. Moments later, the spasm seemed to have

passed and he was nearly asleep, peacefully this time. Chris propped himself against the chair and stretched his legs out on the floor. His mind mulled over the day and he smiled, before allowing silent tears to trickle over his face unchecked. Tears were for times like this when Colin couldn't witness them.

Today had been a laugh. Tomorrow would be a rest day, and the day after.

Day Four

Today Chris knew that Colin wanted to go to the Gallery. They had talked about it over the last two days, when rest had been a requirement. They had talked about other things too-about the funeral, Colin's funeral. As ever Colin had made light of it, using the anagram REAL FUN to best effect. He wanted his funeral to be a celebration. He wanted a piper. He wanted people to dance. Chris smiled at the image, then let the smile slip as the finality of the proceeding twisted the dagger that he constantly felt piercing his heart these days.

'Why? Why? Why did it have to be like this?' he thought as he busied himself in their tiny little kitchen preparing breakfast that Colin would attempt to eat then fail to. His appetite was limited. He said he couldn't taste anything, so eating it wasn't worth the effort. Chris made him try. He knew he had to for as long as he could.

There would come a time when he wouldn't be able to eat. There would come a time when he wouldn't be able to hold anything down; when Chris would have to let him go into the hands of others. Tears welled up. In his mind he shouted, he cried out.

'As long as I'm able he'll be here with me! As long as I'm able he'll stay at home. As long as.....' Chris let the thoughts tumble over in his mind. They wouldn't go. They seemed to be with him always, even in the middle of the night when he slept and dreamed fitfully. Once conscious, they returned to plague his consciousness; sprang into being; permanent residents making their presence known and felt all too frequently. Chris shook himself in an effort to be free of them. It didn't work, so he attempted to lose them by focusing on the breakfast he was preparing. He turned on the radio, kept the volume low, and focused on the words being broadcast. That helped. The words in his head took a back seat, as the news of the day permeated. A noise from the bedroom drew his attention. His feet immediately moved him in its

67

direction. Chris made himself stop as he found himself at the partially open door, when all of his being sought to rush him through to offer help; do everything that needed to be done. Oh how much he wanted to do, and yet he knew he couldn't. Colin wouldn't let him. Not yet. Not when he could manage by himself. He needed to retain some dignity. And so he waited behind the door. He listened intently and knew that Colin was pulling himself out of bed and reaching for his stick. He heard him curse quietly as he stumbled his way to the tiny en-suite loo. A flicker of a smile

crossed Chris's face. Colin was so pleased that he could still pee standing up. Small pleasures. He listened for the tap running, the noise of the razor and caught his breath when a sudden outburst of singing rang through the flat. Smiling broadly, Chris pushed open the bedroom door.

"OK, Pavarotti's wee brother. Would you like your breakfast in bed with the 'waited on hand and foot' treatment, or will you deign to join me at the table?"

"Much as I'm tempted, for I LOVE the hand and foot treatment, I'll come to the table today. And I'll have TWO eggs chopped up in a cup just..."

"....Just like your mother used to do for you when you were a wee wee boy! I know! Ruined rotted you were MacNeill!" interrupted Chris wearing an absolutely radiant smile.

"Worth spoiling I am," chirped Colin emerging from the loo clean-shaven and looking so much better. His eyes were bright and he was wearing his cheekiest smile. Satisfied, Chris returned to the kitchen and left him to get dressed.

"Eggs chopped up in a cup for a man nearly thirty? You'd think he'd have grown out of baby food by now!" he muttered in a voice loud enough for Colin to hear.

"Chopped up with butter and a pinch of salt!! Don't forget the butter and salt!" responded the voice from the bedroom.

Thoughts of funerals and hospices were far from his mind as Colin placed another egg in the pan to join the two already there; dropped bread into the toaster and warmed the teapot.

Yes. Today they would go to the Gallery.

Day Seven

The day at the Gallery had been wonderful. Lifts had eased their way, as did the many seats dotted around for viewing the exhibits. They had spent a long time sitting, admiring, critical of some new pieces, enthusing over favourites. Lunch had been easy too. Time had passed quickly as they absorbed the visual feast before them. They ventured home reluctant to allow the day to pass.

The day after had started well enough. No exhaustion to contend with. Breakfast had passed with a plan to visit the theatre being considered. And then Colin felt sick and was sick, more than a couple of times. The retching stole his energy and left him wrecked. He fell into bed and after another couple of bouts, found release in sleep. Today, he had improved a little. The sickness had mercifully not returned, but he was severely drained by it. He had to be helped to the toilet and took a long time to

68

recover from the effort of taking the few steps there and back. Once again, sleep overtook him. He didn't re-awaken until well into the afternoon.

"Sorry to be such a party-pooper," whispered Colin. "Maybe it's time to get that

contraption in from the cupboard.” Chris saw behind the slight smile that was trying to broaden across Colin’s face. He knew how much it cost for him to surrender this tiny bit of independence.

“You’ve been a bit sick, that’s all. You’ll feel better once you’ve rested some more. You will feel better,” Chris spoke encouragingly, but he knew that better was not much to hope for.

“I know I’ll feel better, but I still think it’s time. It’ll take a bit of time to get used to it, so it’s probably time to make a start.” His voice petered and was barely audible. His eyes closed and he was once again asleep.

Chris opened the cupboard and pulled the commode out of its hiding place. He was surprised to see that it looked just like an ordinary chair. It had been in the cupboard for weeks, and he hadn’t even glanced at it since it had been delivered. He lifted the seat, removed the basin underneath and immediately set about disinfecting it thoroughly. He did the same to the chair, even although he knew that it was brand new and had never been used. Infection was danger territory. Chris had lived with the knowledge of its effects on Colin. He couldn’t take an infection, however small. He had no immunity.

He gave it a thorough clean and moved it into position beside the bed. Returning to the cupboard, he pulled a lovely tartan rug from its position on a shelf and gently drew it from its protective plastic wrapping. He held the softness of it against his cheek and marvelled at the intricacies of its pattern. It was hand-made. Jean had made it and sent it to Colin. Not only had she woven his own tartan, the MacLean across its length, she had also made a border pattern of birds, each carefully embroidered onto a plain piece of fabric and appliquéd onto the main rug. It was a work of art, but then Jean was an artist, and loved Colin to bits. Colin hadn’t seen the rug. He knew a parcel had arrived weeks ago, but Chris had said it was to be a surprise for a day when he needed a wee lift. Today was that day. The rug would help to make the use of the commode easier. Wrapped around his legs, it would offer a little bit of dignity to his having to use it.

Chris hung the rug over the back of the chair and returned to Colin’s bedside. He was sleeping easily now, peacefully. Perhaps the sickness had worked its way out of his body and would offer him a chance to recover. At least for a little while.

Day Fourteen

Today Colin had a little more energy. He could sit up in bed and manage to drink from a mug. He would drink, but he wouldn’t eat. He hadn’t really eaten much in the last week, since the sickness had begun; sickness that had robbed his body of weight and left him utterly exhausted; sickness that had wiped the spark of life from his eyes and left a vacancy that was disturbing to witness. He had lost the will to go

on; given up the fight. Chris saw it and wished that he hadn't. There had been more time promised; more days to live for, but that had been before the sickness had taken
69

hold. He had so little to fight it with, no immunity. Bearing it was all he could do, as Chris looked on helplessly at the ravaging effects it had on his body.

Propped up with pillows, Colin sipped the warm liquid, both hands wrapped around the mug. Chris looked on and resisted the temptation to help. It was hard, too hard to watch. He turned his head away, as the tears which were ever ready to fall these days, attempted to fill his eyes. Unbearable, that's what it had become, although Chris recognised that he himself probably looked worse than Colin at this moment. He hardly ate, rarely slept and found the emotional outpourings all too many to handle. Fighting back the tears, he pulled himself together and made himself smile, as he turned back to face Colin. Their eyes met and Chris's resolve was shattered. Tears poured down his face as he saw the look of helplessness in those lovely blue eyes. The mug and its contents had spilled over though Colin still held it.

“Don’t worry about that. It’s just a little tea. We’ll soon have it cleared up!” Chris tried to speak soothingly, but his voice was distraught. He tried to remove the mug from Colin’s hands and found his own hands being gripped earnestly.

“No!” said Colin, weakly at first. “No!” He threw the mug onto the floor and watched it shatter into tiny pieces. Both hands now gripped Chris’s.

“Look at me Chris,” he spoke falteringly. Once again their eyes met. Tears appeared in both; mirror images, as they shared a moment of silent conversation. “Lie with me please,” said Colin imploringly, “I want you to listen and I need you to hear me, so the closer you are the better. My voice might just fade away to nothing!” There was a tiny wee spark in Colin’s eyes. Chris saw it and brightened. “OK boss. Move over the bed a bit!” Chris positioned himself carefully so that most of his weight was on the bed. He stretched one arm gently over Colin’s chest and rested his head on the pillow next to him. He could see his profile, but he couldn’t quite see his eyes.

“Now if you’re lying comfortably, I’ll begin,” said Colin with an attempt at a chuckle.

“I’m listening,” Chris responded, pressing his head further into the pillow.

“This is hell,” he began. “It is for me, but it’s worse for you. I know that. I’ve watched you. When you think I’m sleeping, I see you crying.” He paused for a while to recover from the effort of speaking too quickly. Drawing a long intake of breath, he went on.

“We knew it was going to be hard. They told us, didn’t they? And they also told us

there would come a time, a time when we could use some help.” Chris’s head shot up from the pillow.

“Now I know where this is going, and you’re wrong. We don’t need them yet. I can manage!” Colin’s hand searched for Chris’s mouth and silenced it.

“I know you can. You’ve been everything to me; my nurse; my lover; my friend. But it is time. You need to eat and sleep and rest. You need to be better so that I can share your energy and feel it lift me!” His breathing was laboured now.

“No more. Don’t say anything else. You’ve exhausted yourself!” said Chris, alarmed by the sound of Colin’s breathing.

70

“YES. MORE!” Colin shouted the words and clenched his hands into fists. Chris was shaken by the anger and frustration in those words. He fought against the urge to get up and challenge Colin, and instead, surprising himself totally, he burst into tears.

“I’m sorry,” Colin turned his head and looked into those tear-filled caverns. “I’m so sorry,” he continued meekly, easing his body onto its side so that he could face Chris. Wiping away tears with the gentlest of fingers, he lingered over Chris’s brow and tried to rub away the anguish his words had caused. They lay together looking at one another. An easy silence allowed the tears to cease. Colin spoke again, slowly and deliberately.

“When I wake up, I want to know that you’ll be there, that you’ll be the first thing my eyes will see.”

“That’s a given!” said Chris in response.

“When I go to sleep, I want to KNOW that you’ll be able to sleep too and rest and not have to listen for my every movement. You’re not my nurse Chris. You’re my partner, my other half, my soul mate. I need you, ALL of you to be there for the time we have left,” pleaded Colin.

Chris’s eyes closed. There was silence between them for a while as Chris considered this latest request. It made such sense, but he fought it. He knew how hard it was for each of them to see the hurt in the other. It made sense to let the professionals help. It made sense to bring in support. But it made the end appear to be so much closer, too close, much too close.

The clock ticked away seconds and minutes as they lay there. It was still light outside, although the evening star was twinkling for all it was worth. The bed was close to the window. Colin could see the stars from it. He loved the stars. He wanted to look at them as often as they appeared, so the curtains remained open all the time. Chris looked at this star of promise. He knew it was there all the time, though he could only see it at night when the clouds were not gathered to blot it out its light. It

had energy, enough to shine all day, all week, all year, all of eternity. Just like love. It was always there, never in doubt. He wasn't a star. Colin was the star, star of stage and screen if he'd had the chance, the opportunity. And now they had to exchange roles. Colin needed Chris to be the star, to shine for him every precious moment left to them.

"OK Boss! I agree with you. It's time. I'll give them a call and bring in reinforcements. I was getting fed up cleaning up your sick anyway. It's time I had a bath and a massage and a haircut and a wee trip to the shops!" he joked, turning his head to look at Colin's face. He saw closed eyes and heard the easy breathing that indicated he was sleeping. Easing himself off the bed, he re-arranged the duvet around Colin and headed for the kitchen, closing the bedroom door slightly behind him. Reaching for the phone, he dialled the number and waited.

"Can I speak to Dr. Hannah please? Chris Mackay here. I need some help."

Twenty minutes later, he returned the phone to its cradle, took a notepad, pen and diary, and carried them with him into the bedroom. Sitting on the armchair near the bed, he took his pen and began to transfer the information from notepad to diary.

"Mission accomplished?" a sleepy voice called out to interrupt him.

71

"None of your business! Anyway I thought you were sleeping. I've let you off with too much, been a big softie. You'll need to toe the line when the pros come in. They won't take any nonsense from you!" Chris fired back with an attempt at laughter. The guilt was still biting his conscience, but he knew that his time to be alone was over. For Colin's sake, he needed help. He needed to be a star with bright shining potential. He needed to shine for Colin.

Day Sixteen

Yesterday Jane came for the first time. Her quiet presence and gentleness was such a support, as was her incredible nursing skill. Immediately she had introduced herself, discarded her coat and begun a conversation with Colin, Chris felt the burden begin to slip off his shoulders. As she spoke, her hands adjusted a pillow, took Colin's pulse and then began to massage his forearms. She spoke quietly, always wore a smile and kindled a cheeriness in the room just by being in it. Colin loved her immediately, and responded well to her encouragements. Even when she decided to give him his first bed-bath, he didn't protest. She had an easy manner which often disguised the deftness with which she went about her nursing. Colin offered no objections. Chris was relieved, and began to relax a little. These MacMillan girls certainly knew what they were about.

Today, Kirsty had been with them, a noisier character, though equally caring and expert in all she did. Colin already adored her. She was an islander herself, spoke

Gaelic and knew some of the folk from his part of the world. He sparkled when she was around. Banter between them was ever present, although Chris hadn't a clue what they were blethering about! With little effort, she persuaded Colin to slide his legs over the edge of the bed, and with her assistance, use the commode again. It had taken time, a lot of time, but the effect on his spirits was immediate. For the past week, he had relied on the bedpan. Weakness had consigned him to bed until the sickness had begun to ease a little over the last day or two. He was eating again, just a morsel or two, but it was giving him a much-needed energy boost.

From the commode, Kirsty suggested a step or two with his zimmer to the chair beside the fire. The flat was so small that from the bedroom to the chair was only a few metres.

"Do you think I could?" he asked.

"I think you **SHOULD**. You'll feel a lot better sitting on the chair than lying in bed. And while you're sitting there out of my way, I'll make up this poor excuse of a bed for you! How about it?" she said encouragingly.

"I will if you will!" he said cheekily, "How many steps are there?"

"Mmmmm, probably about ten, but you can do it in eight with **MY** expert help!"

Kirsty laughed as she supported to stand, steady himself, then begin to step forward with the wheelie zimmer.

"One.....two..." he began to count his steps as Kirsty guided him from behind.

"Six.....I made it in **SIX!**" he shouted triumphantly as he reached the chair and eased himself round to try to sit in it.

72

"Easy Tiger!" cautioned Kirsty, as he let go of the zimmer frame and stood shakily unsupported, "I said **WALK** not triple-jump your way to the chair!" They were both laughing as one helped the other to an eventual seated position.

"Wait till Chris sees me, and I tell him I got here under my own steam!" said Colin enthusiastically.

"OK Thomas. It's a station stop for a while now, and no more shunting away into sidings!" she wagged her finger, gave him her fiercest frowning face to look at, and was rewarded by Colin imitating her exactly. They held their positions, fingers touching, then exploded with laughter. Kirsty threw his rug at him.

"Take **THAT**....and wrap it round those spindly excuses for legs while I make you something to eat. How about a nice soft-boiled egg?" she offered.

"I'd rather have it chopped up in a cup...." Colin began.

"With butter and some salt!" Chris finished arriving at the door with hair still damp from the leisurely shower he had just had. His face lit up when he saw Colin's happy expression. "Kirsty, what on earth can I do with a man who eats baby food?"

he said winking at her, and they all laughed.

“Change his name to Peter or Pan!” she suggested.

“Oh Wendy, Wendy, will you be my mother?” quipped Colin, clasping his hands in front of himself appealingly.

“Mother? Mother? No mother for you me lad. It’ll be the croc for you, an if he don’t get you, I’ll get you with me HOOK!” screeched Chris in his best Cap’n Hook impression.

“OK me hearties, I’m going to sail off to SEE if I can find some eggs to boil and chop into a cup!” Kirsty left them pretending to fight with imaginary swords, laughing all the way to the kitchen.

73

THE BROKEN CIRCLE PART FOUR THE MAINLAND

Finale

Sounds. Feet on the floor; the pumping pulse of machines, one on the left, two on the right; distant voices, probably at the nurse’s station; the siren of a police car coming nearer, then fading away.

Silence. Utter quiet. At first the totality of it had been terrifying. A state of nothingness. No feeling. No hearing. No sight. A senseless world. A lone world, which nothing and no-one could enter. Fighting against it had been useless, until the natural urge to reclaim sense and a hold on reality had prevailed. Hearing was reawakened,

and with it a drifting back to the present. Here and now. Fear subsided until the next time and the time after, and then the inevitability of its coming overtook the fear of it, and miraculously, an overwhelming perception of peace washed its calmness into every particle of being. The release was enormous. It was as if the overhanging clouds of life had been blown away to reveal brilliance. Light and colour flooded into existence. Happiness and love surrounded. There was an absence of pain. There was no doubt. Wellbeing was key. Colin couldn’t remember ever having been so well. He felt good. He was smiling. Sheer joy was emanating from every particle of his being. He was about to move forward, when he found himself listening intently to a sound, a voice. He recognised it and turned back.

Sounds. The pulsing of machines; distant voices and those nearer, closer to him. He knew one voice. He recognised the gentleness of its tone. It was Chris, his Chris. He was talking, most likely whispering. Too far away to make sense of any of the words. Talking about him no doubt. Words floated to him in clutches---had a good night---no change---have to warn you-----maybe a day-----stay as long as you like-----he can hear you.

Feet on the floor. Not just one pair. Two people. The legs of a chair dragged over the

floor. Chris leaning over him, kissing his forehead. He couldn't feel it, but he could hear the nearness of him as he leaned over. He could hear his breathing-the slight wheeze identifying him. Asthma. Not good. Getting worse. All this hospital visiting wouldn't be helping. He should just leave me be. Let me go....Let me go.....Please let me go.....

Please.....

Once again he was in that world of silence. Peace filled him. He let it wash over him and remain, soaking into him, saturating him, drenching him. He waited for the calmness of it to envelop him. He waited for the awareness of his surroundings to visualise. He saw the light. He felt the happiness. He stepped from under his cloak of pain and found himself on a stairway. He was on the first tread. He shielded his eyes from the brilliance as he looked upwards towards the top of the staircase. The light drew him. He began to climb. Tread by tread, energy filled him. He could feel the

74

difference it made to him. He moved at speed, covering treads two at a time. The light attracted him. It shone to him and through him. He felt better, and better, and better, as he drew nearer to it. He was almost at the top. Brilliance awaited him. And then he couldn't move. All that he saw; all that awaited him was pulling him to it. He could feel the certainty of it. He knew he wanted it, but something in him fought against it. It was as if hands were holding him from behind, locked around him, stopping any forward movement. Try as he might, he couldn't free himself. He wanted with all his being to be consumed by the light; to take those last few steps towards it, but he couldn't. He was where he was and was going no further.

Something had stopped him. The dazzling brilliance before him caused him to close his eyes. Tears began to rain over his cheeks. But he didn't feel sad. Why were there tears?

And then he heard it. Far in the distance, he heard it. It was a voice, a voice he knew, a cherished voice and it was calling, calling his name. There was so much pain in it, so much hurt. It shouldn't be like that. I caused that hurt. That's not the way it should be.

Instantly, he turned and began to reclaim those downward treads. He lost a footing and began to tumble....and tumble.....and tumble.....

Sobbing. He could hear sobbing. It was heart-rending. A hand was over his. He could still feel with some of his fingers. He felt the warmth of the hand on his, and was puzzled by it. It was very warm, comfortingly so. And it was small. It wasn't Chris's hand. His hands were cold. Always were. Cold hands warm heart. He listened more intently. The sobbing was easing slightly, subsiding. A flicker of recognition was confirmed by one word, a word spoken so softly, and in her native

Gaelic-Feichein. Then he knew. He knew that the hand over his was his mother's. Flora

“Fechein, Feichein,” Flora whispered the word over and over again as her hand held onto her son's. She stroked each emaciated finger, then squeezed gently willing the hand under hers to respond. She needed him to know that she was here, even although she promised she wouldn't come. She needed to be with him one last time. They'd told her that he might be able to hear her, that she should speak to him. She couldn't find words, at least not yet. She was still shocked at the sight of him. Although Chris had tried to prepare her, she was unable to rationalise the enormity of the change in his appearance.

Viewing him from the side window before entering his little ward had crumpled her resolve to remain strong. Her heart was broken in pieces as she saw his frailness; his smallness; his total dependence on machines and monitors that allowed him to cling to life. This was her boy, her Colin, her talented son, who'd only a month ago danced her down the pier of their island home. One month. Only a month ago. She looked, but couldn't believe the change in him. The body lying on the bed was Colin, but it looked nothing like the son she knew. Her legs gave way under her and she

75

dropped into the chair that Chris had quietly placed behind her. He knelt down and took both of her hands in his. With words carefully chosen, and full of gentleness, he spoke.

“He didn't want you to see him like this Flora. He knew it would hurt too much. He was trying to spare you, to let you hold the image of him that he left you with. You don't have to go in.....if it's too much....” Her head fell down over her chest as another bout of tears overcame her. Chris held her hands tighter and moved so that he could place one arm over her shoulders. She broke down. A storm of emotion shook her relentlessly as Chris held her ever tighter. They sat there until it passed. Flora was drained and utterly exhausted by the severity of the onslaught. Chris spoke with feeling.

“You don't have to go in.....he would understand.....,” Flora wiped away her tears, placed her arms around Chris to give him a huge hug, then rose. Without looking again through the window, she walked to the ward door and went to Colin's bedside.

She had been sitting here beside him for hours, watching, waiting, daring to hope that there would be a sign that he was still there in a body that wouldn't work for him any more. She knew it wouldn't be long. They told her that it might be days, maybe less. If only she'd come earlier, before he'd gone into a coma. But there had been a storm and two boats had been missed. She remembered her promise and felt

guilty. He wanted to spare me this. I love him for that, but I needed to see him. I needed to be with him. I needed to.....say goodbye.

Flora was now almost asleep in the chair. The outpouring of emotion coupled with the shock of seeing Colin had taken its toll. Her hand still lay over his, and her head was resting on the side of his bed. She hadn't spoken or made a sound. Whether consciously or not, she began to sing, a gentle lullaby, an island song, one that she'd often sung at ceilidhs; one that she'd sung to her boy when he was a baby. She sang softly, allowing the rhythm to move her head slightly. Her body began to rock to the waltz-time, just enough to counteract the stillness in the room. And then she felt it. Her hand seemed to be tapping out the rhythm in harmony with her body. And she wasn't moving her hand. It was pulsing. She raised her head and looked at her hand. She stopped singing. Her hand appeared to stop moving too. Very softly she began to sing again. The same song, the same rhythm. Once again her hand was being moved in time. She lifted her hand and looked at Colin's fingers. One of them was moving, One of them was keeping a steady rhythm. Flora stopped breathing as the moving second finger reached over to cross the index finger and stay there. She gasped as her breath returned. She knew that Colin could hear her. This was a sign, his sign, his 'kissing wave' that he always used when saying goodbye. She laid her own hand on his again and squeezed.

"Not yet my son. It's not time to say goodbye yet," she uttered the words so quietly that she barely heard them herself.

Chris sat on the other side of the bed and looked on in wonder. Colin had never, until now, made any kind of movement. And yet he had seen it too, watched in wonder as Flora's singing encouraged a pulse, then that special kiss which seemed to

76

mean so much to her. His eyes moved from that beloved hand to the ashen face resting on two pillows. He scrutinized each feature and amazed himself by forming a smile on his face. Without taking his eyes off Colin, he reached for Flora's hand. Instinctively, she raised her eyes to his and followed his gaze. She too allowed a watery smile to frame her face. It didn't seem possible, but Colin's face had lost its ashen-ness, gained a little colour, and appeared to be smiling. Flora began to hum the much-loved lullaby again. Under her hand the finger that had been crossed, remained so. But the rhythm had stopped, the pulse had ceased to be. She sang on. Her lovely voice was the only sound in the room.