

The Wild Hunt

It had been the light that had woken her, Leigh thinks, or maybe it was a dream. A pale, pink light, seeping in through the threadbare parts of the curtains on the windows and dappling her room in rose. She lies in a cocoon of blankets for a moment, presses the back of her hand to her cold cheeks. They are damp. She doesn't remember crying.

There is a crash downstairs, a muffled curse, a slamming door. A few days ago John Drummond had appeared at the door and demanded a spare key. Just until Sam comes home, he said, as though anyone really expects Leigh's brother to turn up now — when no one has glimpsed even a flicker of his coattails, when at the funeral three weeks ago Leigh stood on the beach alone. There is no telephone in the Welles' house but there is one at the Drummonds' and he could have called. For the past week early every morning one of the Drummond children has let themselves in and made a pot of tea and left a loaf of bread, or a tureen of soup, or a pan of something their mother whipped up. The first few days Leigh had left the offerings in their wrappings on the island, but soon everything left in the breadbox had gone stale or started to mould. She cannot meet the Drummond children's eyes when she sees them in town.

Leigh rolls onto her back and pulls her blankets up around her face. The October air in her room feels stiff and sharp and hostile against her skin. She presses her eyes shut again and tries to remember what it was she'd been dreaming about. The sea. A blurry, smudgy figure wading into the waves. Three crows perched on the rocky shore. Only a series of discrete and half-formed images. She doesn't know what had made her cry.

The next time Leigh wakes the light is a little stronger and a wet nose is nuzzling into her palm. She pulls her hand back into the safety of her blankets and a large weight falls onto her chest, a rough tongue beginning to lick her chin.

Leigh opens her eyes and the collie rests her chin on Leigh's chest, staring up at her accusatorially. The dog gives a quiet bark. At least it's a little later than normal, Leigh thinks. It used to be her father who had fed Maisie in the morning and let her out, and later taken her with him on his excursions through the woods and along the beaches, climbing the cliffs and scouring the moors for specimens. Leigh had never been sure what they were looking for exactly, but she thought it might be something to prove that the island was *special*. They would leave together in the early morning, man and collie, and sometimes they would return that night and sometimes not for a day or two, but whenever they came back her father would always have an odd gleam in his eye, a wildness in him — until a month ago, when Maisie came home but Graham Welles did not.

Leigh pushes Maisie's nose away from her face. The dog whines plaintively. All right, Leigh says, I'm coming. Maisie leaps off Leigh's bed and pads out of the room. Leigh stares at the ceiling for a moment. Getting up feels impossibly useless, feels like trying to scale the sheer slice of the mountain jutting out of the land behind the house. Feels like the dog is still lying on her chest.

The dog in question barks again, downstairs now, and Leigh flings back the covers.

The sun is risen in earnest now, though it is a pale and weak autumn morning sun, hanging low in the sky as though it's too lazy this Saturday to get up properly. Whichever Drummond was here has left embers burning in the kitchen stove so the room is warm, and condensation clings to the windows in tiny diamantine droplets. Plates piled high in the sink.

Dad's dried herbs and flowers hanging from the ceiling over the counter, Mum's shoes sitting by the door where they have for years, since she stole Jack Calloway's brand new, engine-red boat and disappeared in the middle of the night. Everyone says that Áine Welles left for the siren song of the mainland. Until a month ago, Leigh had told everyone that it didn't bother her anymore.

Maisie sits next to the shoes, her tail wagging back and forth across the tiles and a tinny, quiet whine humming between her teeth. We'll go out in a minute, Leigh tells her. Give me a second.

She turns away from the dog so she doesn't have to look at her mother's shoes or her brother's winter coat, hanging by the door. His letter sitting on the island still where she left it — how many days ago? A new one came just yesterday, in a crisp white envelope, and it lies next to the old one, unopened. She does not much care for anything Sam has to say. She has not replied to any of his letters.

It's a sort of dance, avoiding the glare of that crisp white envelope as she pours herself a cup of cold tea and makes herself a piece of stale toast. By the time she shoves her feet into her boots and opens the door for Maisie, the slim white rectangle and Sam's spidery handwriting are seared onto the inside of her eyelids. The collie bounds out into the yard, running circles on the muddy grass. As soon as Leigh sets foot outside the cold October wind whistles into her face and begins to numb her nose. She scowls and gulps down her tea.

The clear morning air has sent Maisie into a frenzy and her paws fling up clumps of mud as she flies around the yard. Leigh leans her shoulder against the worn doorframe. Sam would have yelled at the collie for making a mess but Leigh doesn't see the point anymore. The grass reaches her knees and hides landmines of animal dung that she hasn't gotten around to cleaning up. The fence at the edge of the yard wilts lamely towards the ground.

Everything shrouded in the mist that rolls down from the hills, everything dripping and crystalline. The world wrapped up in green. Green trees and green grass and the green house behind her. The colour of life, her father had called it, everywhere.

Leigh looks up at the hills, the trees giving way to rocky crags higher up, boulders jutting precariously from the edge. This place, she thinks, this place. There is the dog in the corner and the chickens in the coop and the goats in the barn but really it is just her, just her and this island, and nobody else. Yesterday she had been trying to fix the barn's roof because the goats were getting wet, and she had stood on the shingles and looked up at the hills and down at the grass and wondered whether it might be all right to fall.

The sound of a car on gravel. Leigh starts and drops the crust of her toast as Maisie shoots around the side of the house, barking frantically. Leigh shakes off the feeling of heaviness that had settled on her shoulders like a stole, and she chases after the dog.

In the driveway: a shiny black car, long and sleek, and unfolding himself from it against Maisie's attacking paws and tongue, the minister. Leigh thinks he's always seemed too tall for his fancy car, has always wondered how he manages to fit his spindly limbs beneath the steering wheel, how his red-haired head doesn't skim against the roof. She remembers why he is here only when he smiles at her sadly, and a warmth she didn't realise she had been feeling for him evaporates. She feels her face fall into sullenness.

Morning, the minister says. Are you ready?

Leigh shrugs. I suppose. She has been dreading the festival all month, the festival and its beaked masks and its black decorations and its bonfires like funeral pyres. The festival and all the people she will have to see there.

The minister has the good grace not to look surprised, but his eyes sweep up and down over Leigh's ripped and muddied overalls. Are you going to change?

Another shrug. The minister half-smiles. Well, he says, hop in.

Leigh looks at the car. It looks like a hearse. Suddenly the taste of the stale toast in her mouth feels thick, the marmalade cloying. A terrible foreboding feeling in her stomach even though the worst has already passed, and what more can really happen.

I'd rather ride my bike, she says. If you don't mind. I'll meet you there.

The minister nods. Of course, he says, I'll meet you there.

He folds his legs back into the car and the car pulls backwards down the driveway and Maisie follows it barking and Leigh watches it go with her arms hanging loosely at her sides. She watches the light dance on it, on the glossy black paint. The paint on Dad's car is not nearly so glossy — actually it's rusting off in most places — but it's sitting under a tarp in the side of the yard with no one to drive it. He had been going to teach her this year, now she was old enough, he'd said so just a month ago. He'd said once the weather got better. I'll take you out where the only thing you could hurt are sheep. Just you and me. It'll be fun. Sam was always a terrible driver. Don't tell him I said that.

A tug on her sleeve. Leigh blinks twice, coming out of a daze. Maisie is tugging on her shirtsleeve and the minister's car is long gone. The dog's eyes are reproachful. Pull yourself together, she'd say if she had a voice. We have a thing to do.

Leigh fetches her bike.

Moving is good. Moving makes sense. The pump of her legs against the pedals, the whip of the wind against her cheeks, the pant of Maisie's breath as she bounds beside the bike. Sea mist hangs in the air, dusting Leigh's face and collecting in her eyelashes. Soon the grass and the grazing sheep give way to smoother pavement and a low stone wall, the church spire reaching towards the sky in the distance. The sight like a knot in her belly. Every time

she's been in town the past month everyone has put on a smile for her but as soon as she passes she hears them whispering. Did you hear what happened to Graham Welles? Drowned. Fell into the sea at North Beach. Two days before they found the body. Any sight of the brother? Still no word from that fancy school he took himself off to last year. Maybe he isn't coming back at all. Would you want to be responsible for your little sister when you'd just turned twenty? No. Nor I.

Along with a great number of crops and any sense of progress, this island is inhospitable to privacy.

Leigh decides that she's not going to the festival. The road forks and she takes the left turn, the unmarked one, towards North Beach.

A row of crows on the uneven stone wall along the road, three of them, jet black against the soft greys and greens of the island. Leigh squeezes the brakes hard, stuttering to a stop. Maisie stops too and her tail drops between her legs. Leigh gets off her bike and walks past the crows, walks until they are safely behind her before swinging back onto her bike and riding off again.

The sight of the crows is unsettling. Leigh feels it in her chest as the wheels of her bike spin her towards the beach. In October the crows always come in threes.

A few years ago at this time a tourist came through town. She had been tall and willowy and glamorous. She'd worn a white coat with fur around the collar and her hair had been the colour of hot chocolate. Leigh had wondered at the time whether maybe she'd been a movie star, though Sam had been sure that she wasn't. She'd stumbled across Leigh helping

some of the McAllister boys scrub a stripe of blood off the pavement in front of the pub, while across the street Mr Maguire boarded up the westward windows of his bookshop, the nails slipping into years-old holes in the window frames.

What's all this? the woman had asked in a slick and bright sort of accent. Was someone attacked?

We're cleaning up for the festival, Leigh had said. Her hands were stained red with the *sluagh's* blood.

Halloween? the woman had asked, and Leigh had tilted her head, confused. She glanced back at the McAllister boys but they looked just as confused as she felt. What's Halloween?

You don't know what Halloween is? the lady asked, and Leigh stared at her instead of saying that of course she didn't or she wouldn't have asked. Halloween is when you dress up at the end of October and go around collecting candy from your neighbours.

That sounds silly, Leigh said.

It's Bonfire Night, the man standing next to the woman said. His accent had been more like Leigh's but still wrong, clipped, and the boys behind Leigh snickered.

Nah, one of the boys said. It's not that either, mate.

What's your festival for?

To keep away the *sluagh*, Leigh said, returning to scrubbing the blood from the pavement. They come every October and they leave at the end of November. They look like crows at first but on festival day they look like people with these big black wings. They attack each other in the night sometimes and if you leave your west windows open they'll come and take you away to be one of them.

Or they can show you things, one of the McAllister boys said. Things to make you want to die, and if you do, then you have to go with them, too.

The woman looked aghast, her eyes darting back and forth between Leigh and the McAllister boys, as if waiting for one of them to leap up and say that it was all a joke. It's true, one of the boys said. My uncle got taken by the Hunt last year.

The hunt?

That's what the pack's called, Leigh said. The Wild Hunt.

But never mind. Leigh tries to focus on the hazardous path ahead of her. She balances precariously on the edge of the bluff, just before a sheer drop down to West Beach, where sand whirls into the air with the wind and the beach grasses sway and ripple like the grey waters of the ocean do a hundred yards further on. Leigh can see miniature figures walking back and forth across the sands, building bonfires. She stops and watches them for a moment. Later the fires will be like pinholes in a black sheet of paper, almost entirely swallowed up by the darkness and fighting against the wind.

Leigh watches the waves crash in, great towering walls of water. In the summer West Beach is less pale but little less windblown. The grasses are green and the sky, though hazed over with cloud most days, manages to have a distinct blueness about it. Children paddle in the water or fight to make sandcastles against the battery of the wind while their minders watch halfheartedly, sunbathing. But the last traces of summer disappeared a few weeks ago. The tumultuous grey sea sweeps, blurs, washes into the tumultuous grey sky so there is no saying where the two meet. The wind surges across the island, slipping in through cracks in walls and gaps between glove and sleeve, pouring in through open doors, snapping skirts and coats about legs and arms as though attempting to punish their wearers. In Octobers like

these, girls pull their hair back tight to avoid being blinded by it storming about their faces. Boys pull their caps down low and their collars up high. Fires are stoked from dusk until dawn until dusk again. In just a few weeks, to hang clothes out to dry will be to bring them in frozen solid a quarter hour later. The first snow will be a relief.

If you stand on this particular place at the top of the bluff, the stretch of sand and water curls away from you on both sides, giving you the sense that you are standing on the last point of land before an endless sea, the wind wearing you down. You, the peninsula. You, alone.

Maisie barks at Leigh once, and Leigh swings her leg back over the bike again and leaves behind the miniature figures on the miniature beach.

A murder of crows soars overhead and Leigh pauses her pumping legs again. Maisie freezes too. They like the chase, the *sluagh*, it's why they're called the Hunt. It's better not to give them the chance. Sam doesn't believe any of it and Leigh thinks maybe that's why he hasn't come home — so that he can avoid the superstition that falls over the island like a heavy blanket at this time of year, from the first of October till the first of December. It is always a long autumn of nailing westward windows shut and scrubbing blood from the pavement and never moving too quickly. It's the blood that Sam can never explain away when Leigh presses him. So maybe he didn't leave to avoid the superstition, Leigh thinks. Maybe he left to avoid being proven wrong.

Or maybe it wasn't to avoid the superstition, or to avoid the being proven wrong. Maybe it was just to escape all the death.

The path grows narrower, overgrown and rocky and treacherous for someone not paying close enough attention. The moors and their sheep give way to a few scattered trees, and the trees give way to thick, gnarled forest. A small grey line, the path snakes forwards, beckoning. Maisie takes the lead.

The short autumn day has already started to yawn and stretch for bed by the time Leigh and Maisie burst forth on the other side of the trees. The narrow path starts to pull downwards, and Leigh can see the water now. Her breath puffs fluffy white clouds into the air in front of her. Her shirt soaked through with sweat and sticking to her back, her legs crying out for rest. Maisie rushes ahead down the path while Leigh bumps over the rocks and roots down towards the beach. She recognises it only from the grainy photographs strewn across Graham Welles's worktable, the ones he'd gotten developed once a month no matter how much it cost. The black sand punctured with rocks shaped like church spires, jagged edges reaching up towards the sky, shards of black and grey glass.

Leigh swings off her bike before the wheels have a chance to clog in the fine sand, letting the rusted frame fall quietly into the dune. The water is calm up here at North Beach, smooth and glassy and nearly as black as the sand of the beach. What had she expected to find here? The same something special that her father had been looking for? She hadn't been allowed to join the search party for him. She wonders where along this stretch of sand and water it was that he had died.

In the lowering light she wanders across the beach. The sand finds its way into her shoes and chafes against her feet through the holes in her socks. Maisie bounds in circles, spraying sand as she goes. Three crows are perched on a rock in the distance, watching her. There is nothing on this beach, Leigh thinks desperately, though she should have expected no

less, nothing but sand and rock and the remnants of an old boat, the wood worm-holed and rotting away from its nails. What were you looking for? A reason.

She sits down next to the boat and presses her hand into the damp wood. Playing-card sized flakes of the old red paint still cling to the hull, and Leigh thinks that once the boat might have been glossy and beautiful. She wonders how such a beautiful red boat could have ended up here.

Maisie trots up to Leigh and tugs on the hem of her overalls. I know, Leigh says. We should go home. There's nothing here. She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand and gets to her feet. Black sand cascades from her clothing. She turns to fetch her bike.

There's a figure standing a ways down the beach, back turned to her. Tall — unusually so, or is it just the perspective? — spectral, black sand blending into black coat. It's more of a cloak than a coat, actually, now that she squints her eyes and looks closer. Maisie begins to bark and the figure turns around. Leigh blinks once.

Now the figure stands directly before her, an arm's length away at most. It looks down at her. Its dark swathings are not a coat at all, Leigh realises, not a cloak either, but great, leathery wings, wings that the creature has begun to unfurl from around its body. You are marked by us, it said, in a voice that felt a little like it was coming from inside Leigh's head, grating, chilling. By your parents' graves.

I don't know what you mean.

The creature continues to unwrap its wings, spreading them out. A perverted sort of angel before her. Leigh is not supposed to run, it wants her to run, but she doesn't think she could anyways. She doesn't think she wants to. The creature's voice somehow still sounds just a little like a caw.

They are in the sea.

Leigh steps towards the creature. It is not what she thought it would look like. Are its wings really leathery, like a bat's, or are they just hundreds of tiny, matte feathers? She's so close to it now, can see the white of its bones through its skin. If she stretched out her hand she would be able to touch it. Skin like that — would it be soft, paper thin, or rough? There is a streak of something reddish and rusty by the slit that must be the creature's mouth, and she has an unavoidable urge to reach out and brush it away.

They are in the sea. The creature says it again and this time the words stick.

He is, Leigh says. Not her. She's gone. She left us for the mainland. A different life.

Not the mainland. You can be with them.

Maisie is barking still but the sound is faint, like a record player singing from another room. Leigh feels an odd warmth spread through her body. There are no words in her head or in her mouth but the words of the creature before her. Be with them. Perhaps it would be all right to fall. She reaches up her hand to brush away the blood on the creature's face.

We can show you.

Show me.

The *sluagh* wraps its leathery wings around her.

The *sluagh* is gone. Leigh stands on the beach alone, black sand beneath her toes. She should be cold, but she isn't. The sun is rising above the waves, glimmering in the water, orange and pink and red. It shouldn't be sunrise yet. Next to her is Jack Calloway's bright red, brand new boat.

There's a woman in the water. Her blonde hair is piled on top of her head and her skirt billows around her legs. She's waist deep now, and wading further in as Leigh watches. As the woman walks deeper into the sea Leigh feels compelled to walk forward herself,

mechanically, pulled along behind her as though tied to her by a rope. A hook behind her navel. The water on her feet should be cold, but it isn't. The waves lap around her ankles, her knees, her hips. She wants to tell the woman to turn around but she can't find her voice. As soon as the thought catches in her mind the woman looks back and Leigh recognises her mouth, her eyes, the upward turn of her nose. Leigh takes a step towards her mother and her foot plunges downward through emptiness. The water surges up around her face and rushes into her mouth, and while before her lips had seemed glued shut now she can't close them, cannot pull the two halves of her jaw back together. There is no ocean floor, no up or down or left or right, just the dark blackness of the water. Her waterlogged clothes suddenly begin to pull her down and the water climbs over her eyes, the salt stinging like tiny needles. Her lungs, burning. The cold hits her all at once, like slamming into a wall of ice — physical, aching cold that sets her fingers and feet on fire. A thought — more of a realisation, really. I don't want to die. I don't want to die. Blackness around the edges of her vision. Darkness.

A vague sensation of being dragged along a rough surface. Her hair catching and pulling. A pounding beat on her chest and her lungs, her lungs, on fire.

Leigh gasps back to life, tepid seawater spluttering back over her lips. Maisie stops jumping on her owner's chest and leaps out of the way as Leigh rolls over to vomit. The *sluagh* is gone, the crows on the rock, too. Jack Calloway's decaying boat on the beach behind her. There is no sign that the woman in the water had ever been there at all.

Violent chills that make Leigh's bones feel like they are rattling in an empty drawer. Maisie whines plaintively and lies down on Leigh's stomach, nuzzling her nose into Leigh's face, trying to warm her. Leigh wraps her arms around the collie. Clever dog, she cries, clever girl. She can feel the wind on her cheeks more keenly than she did before, the ground against

her back, every breath and every heartbeat. There is no reason to be found but this — this wind, this ground, this breath and this heartbeat. Overhead the stars have appeared, pinpricks in the dark blue blanket of the sky, watery and blurred by the tears that have sprung to Leigh's eyes from one of the pains in her chest. A bird passes across the moon.

Lying on this beach where her parents died, her heart fluttering against her ribs and her lungs expanding with new breath, she feels lavishly, defiantly alive.