
Opening Extract from...

Sound

Stories of Hearing Lost and Found

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Published by Profile Books Ltd

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London
WC1X 9HD
www.profilebooks.com

wellcome collection

Published in association with Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE
www.wellcomecollection.org

The author and publisher would like to make clear that some names have been changed in the text to protect privacy.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Minion by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 775 3
eISBN 978 1 78283 324 6

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Sailing

I TAKE THE TURNING off the main route, slowing to follow the single-track line of tarmac out towards the sea. It's late summer and the verges are thick with bracken and fireweed, their stems knocking at the car as it passes. Over to the north the sky has blackened, banks of cloud massing. Half a week of perfect weather, and it looks as if it's going to break now.

Six miles on the track widens. There's a farm, a scatter of buildings, an office. Beside the verge lie the curvaceous outlines of several upturned canoes with a rack of yellow kayaks poking out of the car park beside it. As I pass the farm a collie comes hurtling out of the yard, racing towards the car. He flings himself at the bonnet and in the instant of his collision I flinch the steering wheel away. His fur flattens against the glass and I feel the thud of his body echo through the metal. A blur of hackles and then he's gone, slid out of view. *Oh God, have I run him over?* Then he's up again, a snarl of black and white against the closed window. His tail is up and his teeth are bare and there's so much energy in him, so much unleashed delight in his rage. He jolts up, front claws ticking on the glass. I can see the force of each bark shoving his whole body forward: thud, thud, thud. The slower I go, the angrier he gets.

I straighten the steering wheel and drive on, the dog receding in the mirror. He's running down the track, the tuft

of his tail peacocking his achievement. After a few moments he stops and watches the back of me.

Just beyond the farmyard there's a passing place so I pull in and stop the car. I look down at my hands, watching them shake. It's not the dog. It gave me a fright, but dogs love chasing cars and that collie has done it before. It was the fact that I couldn't hear the dog. Nothing. Not a whisper. He was giving it his all, every last atom in him, and none of it reached me. No sound, just a sort of muffled rush, and even that might have been my imagination.

I put my hand up to my right ear and cover the little hole on the right hearing aid. Open, close. Close, open. All working fine and the other one too. The aids are small plastic flesh-grey in-the-ear things designed to fit down the tunnels to my eardrums. At the outer end there's a socket for the battery and a tiny gap for sound to get in. At the inner there's another slot where the processed sound enters my ear. I take them both out and dip my head from side to side, then turn the radio on and off. There's nothing blocked, nothing out of the ordinary.

I put the aids back in and the world returns. These ones are designed to cope best in indoor environments, places like offices and homes full of double-glazing and other human beings all soaking up sound. The aids don't deal well with big reverberant spaces and they really don't seem to have got the hang of the outdoors at all. Out here the wind works on the aids the same way it does on a phone, drowning voices below a storm of white noise. If I turn my head slightly the noise eases but that probably means turning away from the speaker, and I need to see people properly in order to be able to hear them because half of what I'm listening to is the words on their faces. Take away most of the sentence, and I can still see whether it's a question or a statement, or pick up enough of the tone to gauge the mood of the speaker. I'm looking for physical guides, and half their diction is there in

the features – the lift of an eyebrow, a hardening tone, the warmth in the eyes.

At this time, in 2004, I am deaf. Not completely deaf, just down to about 30 per cent of normal hearing. I had started to lose my hearing in both ears about seven years ago and it has been declining ever since. I wear hearing aids in both ears and when I take them out, I can hear individual fragments of sound but not really the links between them. Certain words in a sentence or specific sounds are audible, but music is only a beat and a voice is just a chain of broken plosives.

I am here because I'm going sailing. My friend Eric has asked me to come and I very much want to do this. But water is not my element. I'm mesmerised by it and I'm scared of it, and because I'm scared of it, I head straight for it. I love sailing – the adventure, the pleasure of being with friends. But I hate sailing – the cold, the wet, the seasickness, the fear. I'm here because I want to push the love in and the fear away, and at that time I believe the best way to deal with fear is to hurl myself head first at the thing which most frightens me. It is a kind of idiot courage, a determination to force myself towards a different shape. I hope if I do the things that scare me for long enough, they will become easier. I want to override the physical facts, and to teach myself a lesson.

The trouble is that water is not like land. It's said that almost all of what we experience as sound is an echo – that the conversation you hear when you're sitting in a room with someone is mostly just their voice bouncing off the walls. Outside, at sea, there's very little echo. Still water carries sound beautifully because there's such a big surface area from which it can rebound, but choppy water presents a thousand different points of connection. The only surfaces with a good echo are the ones on the boat itself – fibreglass, metal, wood. And when the engine is running it lays a steady thrum over any lower sounds. What that means in practice

is that all the sibilants get knocked out of speech: Nyoupuenerou? Ucuthemooinroe? Ilanacoupleougarleae?

The difficulty is that sailing requires a lot of instructions and understanding. In the heat of the moment I can't expect anyone to stop what they're doing and turn towards me so I know the next couple of days are going to be tricky. If I can't hear something on land it's a problem but there are things I can do to improve it. Out here, blanking an instruction or mishearing a command has much bigger consequences.

I start the car and drive on. Half a mile beyond the farm, the road opens out to a view of water. Down the slip to the loch there's a trailer, a tangle of broken ropes and a few fading fishing nets. Three lines of boats lie anchored in the bay laid out with their bows to the land and their sterns pointing towards the weather. I park up and sit for a second, eyes closed. The bracken is high and there's a bramble patch directly in front of the windscreen. The berries are ripening and when I look at them I feel a surge of affection for all this abundance, the trees and the moss and the solid ripe comfort of earth. I'm homesick for land, I realise, and I haven't yet set foot on the boat. Beyond the windscreen the trees have stilled. No movement from the birds. The loch is clear and a bee probing one of the late foxgloves vanishes into the top blossom. Just for a second time stands and waits. No sound, no movement, just a single moment suspended.

I inhale a single lungful of breath, climb out, lock up, and head down the track. At the top of the pontoon is a car and two people unloading bags. One small boyish figure staggering out of sight down the walkway, and one larger figure, hauling a bulk of sailcloth from the back.

The big figure sees me. He puts down the sail and as he straightens up his smile is wide. All the pleasure of a proper adventure in there, three whole days filled with nothing but the pursuit of fun.

'No Tom yet,' says Eric, hugging me.

I pull my jacket up above my head, grab the bags and scurry down the walkway towards *Lismore*. There she is, surrounded by bags and ropes and lines, primed for a great escape.

Luke, Eric's nine-year-old son, climbs up the hatchway. 'Hello, Bella!' he says as Eric and I lift bags onto the foredeck. 'Dad? There's a drip.'

'Where?'

'In my room,' says Luke.

'Forepeak,' says Eric.

'My sleeping bag's wet.'

Eric swings himself over the side and goes below. In the main cabin there's an overwhelming scent of diesel, old milk, silicone sealant and mould. For the next half hour or so, the three of us gaffer-tape leaks and unload supplies, fill the lockers with food and bounce our sleeping bags down through the hatches. Eric checks the fuel and fresh water lines and looks at the safety gear.

It's been a patchy summer. Most of the time *Lismore* just sits here, looping round her mooring buoy to the motion of the tide and the current. But West Coast weather can be capricious and back in May she got badly beaten up in a gale during which several other boats broke loose from their moorings and set off on an all-night wrecking spree round the loch. Though her chain held, *Lismore* was hit by a couple of rogue boats and ended up with a damaged steering mechanism. This will be the first longish trip she's been on since then, which is why Eric has chosen a gentle inshore circumnavigation of Mull.

By the time we're ready the rain has passed over. The tide is slack and the water is dark, its surface serrated by ripples. We should get going. Just as Eric empties a packet of crisps into a bowl a car appears near the top of the pontoon and a man comes stumping down the walkway. He's wearing shorts, an overcoat and a pair of bright orange

trainers, and he's adjusting the strap of his bag as he talks into his phone.

Tom is Eric's cousin. He and his wife run a hydroelectric company based in Perthshire installing small-scale pipelines all over the Highlands. Before that, he was in the Royal Navy. In fact, Tom is an ex-submariner trained by Her Majesty's Government into a state of extreme competence in any situation from minor catering issue to full-scale nuclear attack. He smiles at us, shoulders a small holdall and a laptop bag onto the deck, and carries on talking. Luke walks over to the bags and looks at them with interest as a heron takes off. It is a further five minutes before Tom ends the call and shoves the phone into his back pocket.

'Hello, lovely people!' he says, somehow managing to kiss each of us in turn whilst also untying the mooring ropes and leaping on board. Eric pushes at the throttle and the black line between land and boat looms wide beneath us.

And we're moving. The tide itself pulls us out on the ebb, though it takes us a further half an hour to make our way from the bay to the sea. Eric stands at the wheel while Tom rides the buoys out into deeper water. By the time we round the final bend and see the Firth of Lorn wide in front of us it's nearly 5 p.m. As we reach open water, the breeze gets breezier and the water gets choppier. There's no single moment when land becomes sea, just a gradual decrease of one element and increase of another.

'Right,' says Eric, looking at Tom and then at me. 'Ready?'

We need to raise the main sail, the hump of cloth currently folded down and tucked along the boom. Tom and I walk along the deck and brace ourselves against the mast. I can hear Tom saying something, but all I can see of him is a pair of feet. I look over at Eric. He nods. Attached to the mast are a selection of different-coloured ropes, none of which have any obvious purpose. Tom says something. I can't hear, so I twist round the mast.

He points. 'Uncleat the halyard.'

I look at him, blank.

'This.' He taps a green rope, unwinds it and begins to pull. I return to my side of the mast, unwind its equivalent, and begin hauling. Tom's legs strain against the weight as the great white shape snags its way upwards. Once it's high enough, we can use the winch levers to raise the rest. I follow Tom's lead, watching his movements until the sail is tight against the top of the mast.

Eric shuts off the motor. In the silence left by the engine the boat's motion changes. Instead of moving forward smooth and upright, it's now directed by the wind. The deck starts to tip to the right and the looped ropes curve out while a coffee mug on the back locker rolls into the cockpit. When the motor's running I can feel its vibration through my feet and hear its varying pitches low in my ear. Without it, wider sensations rush in – a slur of voices, the trace of a tail-note from an oystercatcher overhead.

And then somehow we're sailing, the boat pulled along by nothing but air. I look up at the mast, now twenty degrees off the vertical. Tied high up on the mast are Luke's bicycle and two flags, the saltire and a pirates' Jolly Roger. Both are streaming out behind us now, stiff with the force of the wind. The shush of water over the hull makes it seem as if we're racing along. The sails are taut and the telltales are rigid, the wind's in our hair and the coffee has hit the right bits of our systems. The scatter of nearby yachts somehow makes the water seem benign, even joyous.

On land the light lengthens. There's rain over the hills and a long flat bank of cloud over to the south while the wind from the south pushes us up towards the Sound of Mull. For a few minutes we can relax. We sit on the benches in the cockpit holding tea or beer, watching the water do its work. We chat, filling each other in on work, kids, relationships, filling the gaps left by several months' absence. Eric is just about to head

off to Sudan for a month on a work trip, Tom is having trouble with a non-paying client, I've just moved house.

This is fine, I think. It's going to be fine. I can hear them. Sitting here, things are easier because I can see their faces clearly and it's daylight and the wind can't get at us so easily when we're sat down in the cockpit. Through the fibre of the hull I can feel the sounds of the boat itself – the slap of the halyards, the deeper, more descriptive sound of the wind against the boom, the sailcloth tightening or loosening depending on our speed and direction. And under it all the susurration of the sea itself. The shush it makes as it slides along the hull, fast or slow, urgent or gentle, its mesmerising endlessness.

One of the benefits of deafness is that it teaches you a lot about acoustics. Pilots talk about air as a visible thing; its speed, its flow, the quirks and currents in a particular valley, the way the wind assumes a colour or mood. The same applies to sound and the way it's shaped. Cold means more reverberance, hot means less. Although it's warmer, city air is harder to hear than the air in the country. Snow softens sound though the cold in ice clarifies it. Out here, the air is cool, but the boat itself contains a series of different acoustic microclimates – the cockpit, the deck, the galley.

And there's also the universal human ability to tune in and out of other people. Everyone has it and everyone does it, every day, all the time. Even if you haven't seen an old friend for a long time their voice stays within you – the way they speak, their rhythm and diction. Far back down the side streets of the human brain is a tiny recording studio in which all the tracks of a lifetime are laid down: the difference between a true and a false laugh, the exact way your husband says 'brilliant' or 'orchestra', your colleague's habit of elongating 'Glasgow' but not 'glass'. Without acknowledgement or effort, you can recall exactly the way your son's first cries differed from your daughter's or the way your brother drops

an octave when he's trying to impress someone. You know what your boss sounds like when she's nervous and how that differs from the way she speaks with friends. You could calibrate the note of danger in your partner's voice down to micro-decimal points or discriminate between several thousand different shades of 'no'. You know what your girlfriend sounds like when she's flirting, or how when she's angry the Geordie in her comes to the front. You have the world's most perfectly engineered voice-recognition software invisible, inside.

In fact, it doesn't even have to be people you know. If you turn on the radio you know who's speaking without the need for introductions. You understand which politicians' voices sound honest and whose pitch you'd never trust. Without knowing it, you've already spent half a lifetime familiarising yourself with total strangers. You can hear all the altered shades of mood between one day and another or pick out the difference between rehearsed and true. You can locate the pinch of fear, the ease of lies or the warmth of laughter. It's all there, all available. All yours.

And I know these three voices well. Eric has been skippering a boat for so long he could probably be heard in Rockall. Nice clear voice, doesn't slur or run his words together. When he first bought *Lismore* he made a vow never to become a shouty skipper because he'd already seen enough people terrified by some old Ahab who transformed from easygoing charmer to maritime psycho once on deck, so he never yells. He's learned well enough to throw his voice from bow to stern and get stuff done without the need for keelhauling. Confident diction, opens his mouth properly as he's speaking, doesn't nibble his sentence ends. Luke speaks just as clearly as his dad though his voice is higher and thinner and what he wants to say sometimes comes out in a rush, so I have to concentrate much harder on reading his face.

Tom is a slightly different case. Because of his military

training, Tom does everything in life while maintaining exactly the same tone throughout: agreeable, instructive, aimed always at a level of understanding somewhere between cabinet minister and small child. It is a steady, patient voice designed to convey both authority and a lifetime spent dealing with people just marginally less magnificent than himself, though his natural pitch is very low. On land he could hold the Albert Hall, but out at sea his words have a tendency to sink beneath the waves. He's used to dealing with that by slowing down, but, though his diction is perfect, I can't get away with not seeing his face.

But so far, I tell myself, I'm on the boat and we're outside and I can still hear them all. Everything will be OK. It will all be absolutely fine. I don't want to tell them that my hearing seems to be getting worse because saying it out loud just makes it twice as true. And I'm sure it's unnecessary – these are people I love and want to live up to, so I don't want to make some victimy grandstanding disability-awareness statement.

It does not occur to me until a very long time later that, by failing to explain how bad it has got, I am making life more difficult for everyone else. And that, in trying to take up less space on the boat, I am actually taking up more.

By 6 p.m., the rain has passed over us. Tom is steering and Eric is over by the stern helping Luke reel in the fishing line. I am down in the galley making tea. Tom is making calls and Eric has got his back to me. I'm concentrating on the stove, and for a couple of minutes I hear nothing. Eric appears in the hatchway, blocking the light. He's pointing urgently towards the back of the chart table.

'… forecast! Radio!'

The evening shipping forecast, essential to all sailors. It's a VHF set, not straightforward, and I'm fumbling, unable to hear more than a crumple of static. I don't know how it works so I keep turning back to face Eric because he's behind me. It's taking too long. He lifts himself over both me and

the cooking in one practised motion, lands by the chart table and adjusts the set.

At home, the shipping forecast sounds like a landlubber's prayer of thanks for not being at sea. At sea, it sounds like a different kind of prayer entirely. Barometric pressure, visibility, Beaufort Scale, the rise and fall in rhythm like the swell of the tide. But all that poetry is just rococco over the real story: bad weather with some stupendously bad weather to follow. As I stand close to the set I can just about understand that there's an area of low pressure in the Atlantic heading in from the west, strong winds from the south and maybe half a day of mixed fortunes. Tomorrow morning might be OK but the rest sounds like trouble.

'I can see rocks!' shouts Luke from the bow. He sounds delighted.

It takes us half an hour to get ourselves through the entrance to Loch Aline. By the time we start looking for a mooring buoy, the light is almost gone. Along one side, there's a slab of forestry. On the other there is dust, several acres of raw quarried rock, a jetty with a couple of unladen cargo ships moored alongside. No buoys.

We need to get the anchor out so Tom and I head to the front and begin trying to disentangle the chain. It's snagged halfway along its length. One of the links must have picked up a stone and fouled itself on the links farther down. Both of us are pulling but the stone won't come free.

'… n … ou … allet?' asks Tom, head down, his sentence vanishing below the chink.

Sorry?

'Hammer,' he says. '… thi … o … t it wi …'

Hammer. I walk back over to the locker by Eric and start going through it, looking for the right tool.

'Hit it!' says Eric, his voice raised. 'Hit it on the capstan!' He mimes.

What's a capstan? Back along the deck, where Tom is

already banging the snagged link against the winch, pushing the wedged stone out. As the chain finally comes free Eric puts the boat into neutral and then reverse. As we release the links down into the water I feel rather than hear its weight through the soles of my feet. The water slides out backwards along the bow. Nothing. The anchor still hasn't caught. Again we pull it up and again we lower it. It takes us three more tries before we're fixed, held tight in seven metres of water. By now it's dark and there's a mean little breeze stealing the warmth from the backs of our necks. Luke is below, eating pasta and cheese.

By the time we've got things together and Eric has made supper, it's too cold to sit outside. Excellent, I think; that means at least 20 per cent fewer 'sorry?'s. There's light down in the diesely fug of the saloon. Outside in the night there's only the electronic glow of mobiles to illuminate their faces, which means I'm more likely to mishear. I don't like having to ask people to repeat. I find it annoying and I assume others must too. *Swing over to walk on the right side, look round from the washing up, read the reflection in the window, strike for the one clear word in the sentence.*

It takes us most of the following morning to motor up the Sound of Mull, sitting in the sun, eyes closed, not enough wind even to attempt sailing. The Sound is quiet for this time of year, mostly just lobster boats and ferries, plus a few yachts sliding in and out of Tobermory.

Eric hands me up a cup of coffee, climbs out of the hatch and starts examining the electronics around the wheel. 'Bloody autopilot. Give me some throttle?'

At the base of the wheel is a gear lever, nice and self-explanatory: forward for forward, backward for reverse, centre for neutral. I push the lever forward and Eric takes his hands off the wheel. *Lismore* pulls to the left, sending us round in a broad circle. Luke and I stand by the prow and watch the far end of Ardnamurchan rotate past us three times. 'Da-ad! What have you done?!'

'Arse!' says Eric. 'Bastard! Bastard! I fixed that thing! Sorry, Luke. I fixed it, and it worked fine.' He disengages the mechanism, takes the casing off, examines it, replaces the casing, steps back and kicks the wheel base twice.

Same thing. The faster we go the tighter the loop. After twenty minutes, we're all dizzy. Eric picks up the chart and removes a fragment of toast from the top of Ben More. 'OK, we'll just have to have someone on the helm the whole time.'

We spend the morning on the island of Lunga, chatting, eating, watching puffins, forgetting the time. We haven't been back on the boat for long before the weather starts to shift. From the north-west, a flat covering of cloud comes sliding in over us. It's grey and featureless and it's travelling fast, blocking the light and rendering everything down to a shadowless flat. There's a sense of weight and purpose behind it, and of the sea's temper rising. We need to get through the Sound of Iona and round the south-western point of Mull to the mooring at Ardalanish tonight. The early part we can probably sail but the rest we'll have to motor.

By the time we're parallel with the abbey on Iona, the feel of the afternoon has changed completely. The wind is up and the current is running strong towards the mainland. The temperature has dropped and all of us have put on extra layers of clothing. The water in the Sound is restive with an odd uneven swell to it. The last few tourists on Iona are making their way through the gravestones down to the shore, waiting for the ferry.

As we pass the workmen's cottages on Earraid I'm kneeling on the back locker making calls when the wake from a passing RIB hits us. A gout of water hauls up over the transom, hitting the guard rail and soaking me. When I wipe the water off I realise that the mobile is OK but my right hearing aid has gone dead. Oh God. I take it out and try to revive it. Nothing. *Damn.* Damn for several reasons. Damn because the right ear is my good ear. Damn because

although these are insured I only have the replacement for the left ear here on the boat with me. It looks like I'll just have to work with one ear.

By the time we emerge through the southern side to the Sound and turn the corner back towards the mainland, the light has shaded over into a sullen dusk and the two or three other yachts near us have fled for Tobermory, sails down. I watch Eric's face for cues. He looks purposeful and focused, concentrating on the currents. Good. That's good, I think.

In order to get round to Ardalanish we have to pass through the gap between the edge of Mull and the Torran Rocks. The gap between the rocks and Mull itself is a mile wide and though there's now a tide doing its best to drag us inland, there's also a wind pulling us out. The main difficulty with the Torrans is not the rocks themselves but the weather system those rocks create. Far beyond their extremities there are rumples and boilings in unexpected places and currents where none should be. This is not the smooth-skinned sea we were looking at earlier this afternoon from Lunga, this is a darker character full of conflict and haunts. Even now on the approach, there are flat patches surrounding us, brazen circles where the water has been hammered out like flattened tin. When we move through these circles, there's a thumping sensation as if something – or someone – had just bumped along the hull beneath us.

The best thing to do is to hug the coast of Mull, creep round the Torrans and hope really hard that the rocks don't see us. But here down the line from the Iona side comes the wind. We see it before we feel it, a darkening on the water, a blue-grey presence opening and spreading wider and wider until it chases all the sea down dark before it. The sheep on the Mull side have gone into one of their foul-weather huddles braced against the rain, and when the wind hits us it pulls at the wires so hard the note thrums all the way through the hull.

It is just as we reach the eastern point of the Torrans opposite the tiny islet of Eilean a'Chalmain that the engine fails.

The first we know of it is a break in the rhythm. Then the boat gives a snort of surprise, the rhythm restarts for a couple of seconds and, with a last leap, it's over.

Luke is sitting in the galley, slice of pizza paused in his hand. 'Dad?'

Eric looks at Luke and at Tom, who is over by the mast on his phone. Then he thrusts the wheel at me.

Tom has already ended the call. As Eric starts undoing the bindings on the sail, he calls something over his shoulder in my direction.

From this position, the wind is blowing directly into the left hearing aid, obliterating everything. I turn my head and yell, 'Can't hear!'

Again Eric shouts and points. Again I can't hear. Holding the wheel with one hand, I climb up onto one of the lockers, trying to see more of his face. It takes three tries before I get what he's saying.

'Two hundred and eighty degrees.' He points over his shoulder south-east towards the Firth of Lorn. 'Over there! Hold it steady till we get this up!'

At the moment, we're pointing towards Mull. I look at the horizon, then at the different electronic readings, then at the water. The wheel is wide, requiring both hands to span it, and somewhere through its inner workings I can feel the rudder cutting through the water. Unlike with a car wheel there's a delay between the turn of the wheel and the response from the boat. I'm not confident at helming and the confidence I do have always vanishes into that little pause. *Why doesn't it respond instantly? What if it's supposed to turn the other way?*

As Eric and Tom concentrate on the sails the boat slides leftwards into one of the circular boilings. Almost

immediately, the wheel goes slack. The rudder has lost traction in the water and the wheel just whirls in my hands. I turn it from side to side but there's nothing – no feel to it, no grip on the water.

It takes me two or three tries, hauling the wheel from side to side, before I can get us anywhere near 280 degrees. Almost as soon as I do so it slides out again, jibing to the left. We're circling now, the coast of Mull slipping past us. It doesn't matter which way I spin, the rudder still feels as light and aimless as if it's broken. On either side of the mast, Tom and Eric haul.

Eric yells something. I can't hear him. He yells again. I still can't hear him.

I bend down and call through the hatchway, 'Luke? Can you come up and tell me what Eric is saying?'

Luke looks up. But as he walks up the steps, he's barefoot and wearing a onesy with a fleece on top. I hadn't realised, but he'd changed for bed an hour ago. There's no way he can go on deck wearing that; he can't clip on.

The sail is halfway up and I can see Eric straining, all his weight at the winch. I can't get this boat to move, and nor can I get it to stay still. As the sail rises, the boat begins to heel over. Still nothing. We're still pointing in the wrong direction and the water is still controlling us. There's so much water on my glasses I should take them off and wipe them, but I need both hands. I slide the wheel round again to the Mull side and this time feel the beginnings of resistance. Up above, the sail cracks hard in the wind. I keep turning, heading towards that resistance, understanding just enough to know that the wind will only fill the sail and drive the boat when it's at certain angles. When the boat has turned to a point where the wind spills out the sail goes slack, the boom swings round and all that weight of sailcloth slaps around uselessly. The trouble is that the angle where there's most resistance is not the direction we should be facing.

Just as I sense the beginnings of connection, we slide into another boiling. As it turns and slackens, the sail empties and the boom swings round again. The sails slap, a great panicky battering against the mast: *BANG! BANG! BANG!* Oh God, I can hear that all right. How can it make so much *noise*? Both Eric and Tom have stopped trying to raise the sail and are yelling something at me. That way! *That way!* I stand there, knuckles white, spinning this stupid directionless wheel in the middle of this old wet graveyard tuned to the will of the sea.

Through the rain I can half-see Tom shouting the shape of my name, but the gale takes his words and flings them overboard. I can't turn out of the wind because if I do I can't see Eric or Tom so I just stand there, glaring over the edge of the spray hood for some sort of clue.

Tom is gesticulating, pointing up the mast at the tell-tales, the little bits of string hanging off the top of the mast which act as guides to wind direction, and then at something behind me. Eric has one hand cupped around his mouth and is hauling at the ropes with the other.

Tom lets go of his rope and strides down the deck, pointing behind me. The half-risen sail bags and slaps. 'The Minch! The Minch!'

The *Minch*? The Minch is the stretch of water between the Outer Hebrides and the top of the Scottish mainland. It's miles from here, due north. What does he want the Minch for? He was pointing south-eastwards before. Obediently, I swing the wheel round. That falling pause, then the wind smacks us and the boat tips so sharply there's a slam of falling crockery from below. All three of us on deck have to grab for handholds and, when I look up, I see that we are now beam-on to the current. Beam-on, I think: not good.

Both men stop winching and stare over. With his free hand, Tom is making exaggerated spinning motions. 'Round!' he yells. He lets go of the mast and stabs a finger out to sea. '…! …!!'

Rain spatters against my glasses. I look upwards, then sideways, trying to catch his words. 'That!' he yells, now pointing behind me. 'Mainsheet! *Mainsheet!*'

Mainsheet? Not the Minch. I had misheard. I look behind me and then up again at Tom. 'The mainsheet! Undo the mainsheet!'

Sheet? *Sheet?* That's not a sheet, it's a rope. I spin the wheel back to where I was trying to get it before and yank the end of the rope out of its cleat. We're turning again. *No grip.* Is it my imagination or do the Torrans look a lot closer? The sheet/rope comes free and the boom swings round to the right with a bang. I pull it taut and look back at Tom. He nods, so I yank it back into the cleat and tie it off again.

Luke is standing on the step at the top of the hatchway, peeping over the top of the hood. 'Luke,' I say in my best totally-no-problem voice, 'maybe best to stay below.'

Luke turns round, screws his face against the rain and vanishes into the cabin. I look at the warm yellow light down below, that little fairytale haven where there's food and heat and the invincible certainty that grown-ups can fix things. Rain drips down my neck.

Again, there's the faint feel of resistance beneath us. I steady the wheel and try to head into that sensation. We're nowhere near 280 degrees, but I'd do anything to get out of this godforsaken water and the overwhelming crime of the sails. Why won't this place let us go? Eric points again, shouts again. I can't hear his voice, but I can see where he's pointing. *Over! Over!* Hard to the right! I turn again, and the resistance disappears.

'… ell …! … ll …! … t … ay!' Eric is holding on to the mast with one hand, trying to amplify his words by cupping the other around his mouth. I can't see a thing. I'm too terrified to shrug so I just stand there holding the wheel so tight my fingers cramp white.

He turns back, says something to Tom, jams the winch

back in its hold and strides down the deck. As he gets to me he looks me full in the eye and says clearly, 'Go and help with the sail.'

As he moves to take the wheel, I find my fingers have petrified to the metal. 'Sorry,' I say, unsticking them slowly, not looking.

Up on deck, the sail is up past the halfway point, but the clips linking it to the mast have snagged. Eric angles the boat to the best of the wind, lets it drift towards the edge of one of the boilings and then stops the wheel down hard in one position. This time, instead of turning back to dead water, *Lismore* pushes through and into the current. Beneath me, the sea hisses white. Tom, on the upper side of the deck, is putting his full weight into turning the winch, but the cloth keeps snagging. And every time I look up the Torran Rocks seem to reach a little closer. The wind sings again through the wires, slackening and then shoving hard, and even Eric is having trouble finding the right point of sail.

It takes Tom and me what feels like hours to raise the last few inches, cursing at the winches and stabbing at the clips with the boat hook. I'm leaning backwards at an angle of about 25 degrees and I am shaking, from fear or from cold, I don't know which. When I hear the rumble of Tom's voice I no longer respond. I can't face my own faults in not hearing him again.

It gets dark – a shineless blackening – and it gets cold. All we can see of the Torrans now is an outline against the sky, a thickened shape massing at the edge of our attention every time we turn. Though Eric has got us back into easier water, we can't move past the rocks in the right direction until the sail is fully up and we can start tacking from side to side, stitching a wake over the sea to a place out of danger.

When the sail has risen to within the last few inches of the top, Tom taps my arm and makes a cutting motion. We cleat off the ropes and sag back to the cockpit while the wind circles us, looking for the weakest spot.

It is a further hour and a half before we have tacked our way out of the Torrans' reach. We haul and untangle, unspinning one side to spin the other, waiting till the sail flips behind the mast, too drenched to say anything much.

In between tacks, Eric works at the diesel fuel line while Luke, still in his onesy with a foul-weather jacket and a pair of wellies on top, wobbles a torch above him. There's a lumpy swell rising and the moon is still lost behind clouds.

After an hour, Eric pushes the cover down. Luke clambers onto the chart table and turns the ignition key. There's a short impassive whine and then a cough which reaches right deep down through the whole boat. I hear a choke, then a splutter. The engine shrugs, almost cuts, recovers itself. The third time Luke turns the key, it steadies.

Slowly, gingerly, Eric looks up. He raises a finger, listening. Then, like a parent tiptoeing away from a wakeful baby, he replaces the hatch cover and steps back. He raises both hands, palms up. All of us listen. Through my feet I can feel a catch in the motor's throat, a slip in its rhythm. But it's going. It's going, and we're moving, and that's all that matters.

By the time we've found Ardalanish and dropped the anchor it's almost midnight. The following morning, Tom leaves. He has to get back for meetings and he can catch the ferry over to the mainland from Craignure. The three of us sail back towards the mainland, haul the sail down and motor towards the hidden inlet.

'I'll clear, you helm,' says Eric, handing me the wheel again and holding my eye just a second too long. He wants me to get my nerve back. 'Can you take us in?'

Oh God, I think. I can't do that again. I can't hear, and I can't steer.

'OK,' I say.

To get back to the loch, we need to steer back up the narrow two-mile channel, slaloming our way around the red and green port-and-starboard buoys. The mouth of the

channel is wide but then it narrows abruptly, shelving down on one side into a disorder of rocks and spits. Small white cottages and farms line both sides, some obviously locked up for winter. To negotiate the entrance successfully boats have to come right in close to the northern bank, through a strong tidal race, and then swing out again round the corner.

I look at the depth finder and wonder whether it's playing up. One minute it says we've got fifteen feet of water below us, the next we've got two. Some way ahead of us there are two buoys, one red and one green, both almost obscured by white water pushing over their tops. *Red to port, green to starboard.* Except that here, because of the tight corner, green is to port and red is to starboard. I slow down. Bad idea. *Trust what the markers tell you. Rev the motor, pull the boat right in to the very edge of the shoreline, make the corner. Do it fast.* The depth finder is all over the place; ten feet, three feet, twenty feet. The wind is picking up again, the sound of it pushing at the remaining hearing aid.

Eric is sitting on the deck surrounded by folds of sail, the phone in his hand. Down near the water's edge I spot two signs: a black and red stripey pole and a white circle, one about twenty foot from the other. Red and black must be danger but I don't remember anything about white marks. Is it a wreck sign? Twelve feet. Eric looks up, says something. I can't tell whether he was talking to his wife on the phone, or to me.

'Eric?' I say.

He wedges the phone between his shoulder and his ear, unreels a length of tape and tries to rip it with his teeth. The wind is strengthening again.

'Eric?' This is ridiculous. I should know this. I have my hand on the gearstick, wondering whether to rev the engine and go for it, watching the depth finder. The race is getting closer.

A herring gull is standing on top of the black-and-red one and the white circle seems very far over, almost concealed by a rhododendron bush. Does white mean stop, or foul ground, or mortal danger, or what? I stop looking at Eric and stare fixedly at the seagull on the post.

We're down to eight foot. Seven. Six, for God's sake, and I still have no idea what a white or a yellow pole means. I put the boat into neutral, which means it slows and then turns. It's the same feeling as yesterday, except that this time the water knows exactly where it wants to take us. It's disrupted and angry, tugging hard, trying to yank us towards the shore.

Eric looks up, sees what's going on, gesticulates. 'Bella! Pu … t … ttl … !'

I can't look at him because I'm trying to keep control of this thing. Six and a half. Six. The skipper of this boat has entrusted me with 38 feet of fragile fibreglass and his only son, and I'm about to throw the lot on the rocks. I am shaking again. I push the boat back into gear and swing the wheel round. Too far round. Now the boat is side-on to the shore. Eric is yelling something at me, the wind's in my ear *and I can't fucking hear.*

Luke, who has been sitting on the back locker with his phone, looks up and says something. When I don't respond, he says it again. The third time, he puts it down and taps me on the shoulder.

'I'll do it,' he says, staring into my face, making his words big.

'No!' I say. I can't hand over the boat to a nine-year-old. 'Just tell me what the marks are!'

He looks over at the right bank.

'The white one! What's the white mark?'

He looks at it again, then back at me. Eric is advancing with the phone still in his hand, saying something. I can see the shapes his mouth is making, but not the sense.

Luke positions himself beside me and puts his hands

– his small-boy's hands – on the wheel. 'It's a sign.' He moves over. 'Look. I'll do it.'

Sure enough, as he pulls to the side, the boat swings round, just enough, not too much. He pushes the gear lever down a couple of centimetres so the sound of the motor tightens. The depth finder goes into freefall – six, then suddenly ten, then back to six again, then thirteen, then twenty. The boat is now heading in the right direction. At full revs, we round the tight corner through the buoys with inches to spare.

Eric has reached us. 'What happened?' I can see the anger in his eyes.

'It's fine, Dad,' says Luke. 'She didn't know what a road sign was.'

'Sorry,' I say. I don't look at him. Or Luke. I get up, walk down the deck to the bow, sit down, cry.

The humiliation I can stand, but the stupidity I can't. I shouldn't have come on this trip – all I did was endanger the others. I am angry with myself for being incompetent and I am angry with my ears for being unable to hear. It's such a simple thing, the act of hearing, so easy, so why can't I do it? I'm perfectly healthy, perfectly intelligent, perfectly capable of learning what needs to be learned, yet I seem to be too idiotic to steer a boat or hear a command. Somehow, I must have done this to myself. The deafness is a judgement, a physical sign of moral infirmity, proof I am somehow unsound.

At the head of the loch is calm water. The other boats swing on their moorings surrounded by the smell of blossom and wet grass. We pack and clean, unload sacks of rubbish and unclean clothing onto the pontoon, return to our cars. The goodbyes are perfunctory; all of us are keen to get away.

THAT NIGHT, AT HOME, I close my eyes. I see a version of myself lying on the ground. I'm curled up, not moving. I see another two or three versions of me standing above, kicking

at the body below. The figures move round, top to bottom. Stand, balance, step back, consider, kick. Particularly the head and especially the ears. Then the heart. Most of all the heart. I lie on the ground, but I don't resist. The figures aren't angry. They're just neutral, inexorable. Almost scientific. Step back, consider, kick. Doing a good job. Nothing left unbroken.