

## Chapter 2

The winter hadn't come by then. The shelving terraces were strewn with tattered crocuses. Blind daffodils spiked the upper terraces in tight huddles among slender trees. In the conservatory the still air was dense with sunlight and the scent of forced hyacinths.

Jo (in fourteen braids) ran in. She clasped Mike's hand and embarked on a vaudeville of sobs and sniffles.

"The tiger," she cried.

"What?"

"The tiger. The tiger rug"

Cal was there too, still in his nappy. He sucked noisily from a feeder cup.

"The rug?"

"The tiger rug."

"On the programme?"

"Yes. Poor tiger. Dad. I'd hate to be a bee." And left. Cal pulled the cushions from the basket chair then followed Jo. Angus shuffled across the Sutherland slate floor and buried his face in the soft wool of Mike's cardigan.

" I'm bored."

"Really?"

" What can I do? And hungry?"

"Whatever you like?"

" But what?"

"Whatever? "

And then they were gone again and it was still, hot, scented. Cassie sat opposite, leafing through the Observer. A red plastic spike pinned handfuls of chestnut curls in a ramshackle pile atop her head. Her broad face was calm. In front of her on the tabletop lay two novels, the sports section, three tile catalogues, a dirty coffee cup. She read arched forwards, as if forever in the act of getting up, going, setting out. She turned another page. She scanned.

Three months had passed since Mike had once again resolved to transform himself. He had made little progress.

Briefly, in the cold quiet of the first month of the year he had struggled with the discipline, the mindful sitting, stillness watching clouds. But life pinned him by an ankle into contingency. Projects took him once more to the surface of things and, when he looked down into the depth below him, like pebbles on the streambed, there were regrets.

"You're looking very pensive?" Cassie remarked.

Cassie had a nose for idleness.

"No."

"What are you thinking about?" Her eyes continued to scan the Review section for opinions to pass on.

"Nothing."

"You'll get depressed again." She was smiling: which seemed inappropriate.

"I won't."

Mike panicked. The flat pages of regret through which he has been calmly leafing suddenly seemed filled with shameful secrets he could never confront. He wanted to die. He wanted to disappear. Cassie would not permit stillness. It was not in her nature.

"I'm going to get started," she said.

The winter never came. At breakfast, in an act of divine impatience, Cassie declared spring.

"We could move those stones around and sort them," she said.

As she left the room, Cal offered Mike a soiled nappy which the boy had personally removed. The child stood, expectant and a little reproachful, his lower limbs smeared with filth. And Mike let go.

That spring, Cassie's project was a dyke, fifteen yards long and three feet high. The dyke existed at that moment as a heap of stones. The stones were piled at the field's edge on the far side of the wood, the spoil of decades of ploughing which had gouged up this disparate medley from the soft earth. All winter the dyke had been discussed, visualised and planned. In a sense the dyke already existed. Mike stepped from the house and the dyke was there, printed by Cassie's imagination onto the winter landscape. Only the recalcitrant details of entropy and location stood in their way.

Mike dumped the first rock into the wheelbarrow. The wheelbarrow couped over, spilling the stone onto the broken earth. Mike righted the barrow and repeated the process, this time compensating for stone and barrow so that the toppling was not repeated. And another stone. And another stone. And another stone. And another stone.

Mike stopped. He stretched his limbs up and away and tested the knots and crackles in his neck. He ran a muddy hand across the short stubble on his chin and scalp, recalling as he did so precisely that gesture in his father. Precisely that. Amazing.

The children were playing among the trees that screened the north side of the garden. Jo was climbing, arranging rope around and over branches. Angus stood below, guiding her design. Mike pushed the barrow forward around the house and down the winding path. He tumbled out the stones at Cassie's feet.

Cassie, in gloves and overalls, began to sift the stones into piles based on size and shape. It was all information, Mike mused. Information cemented the dyke. Information was the dyke. Stone was only its context.

Mike thought this over as he pushed the barrow around for another load of stones.

And another stone. And another stone.

He found stones to have endless variety in every dimension of their being as stones: chemistry, texture, colour, shape.

There was granite of course. These Grampian hills clung to a core of granite. Grey granite and red granite: but also mudstones and basalt and quartzite and gneiss. The granite yielded up, here and there, massive platelets of mica which he took time to unpick to sheets as clear as cellophane. The virgin surfaces were pristine and glamorous. Another stone.

Dense and uncompromising, the stones sat in the barrow and allowed the fullness of gravity to bear them back down into the earth as he pushed the barrow back around to Cassie's worksite.

"Can you help me with this?" she asked.

Together, they manoeuvred a few pre-selected large stones into place at the end of the virtual dyke. The precision and effort required felt good. They worked in harmony. Mike worried about Cassie's fingers. She was reckless with her fingers.

The first stone was a trapezoidal lump of granite. Next to it they placed a more regular block of basalt. Cassie leveled the blocks with flat stones and wedges. The next block was granite again, the next again quartzite, veiny and discoloured yellow. Soil still clung in the crevices and onto the faces of the stones. They laid four yards of foundation, stood back to admire. Cassie wiped perspiration from her forehead with the back of her glove and smeared red earth. Her dark hair stirred in the chilly east wind and took root in that film of mud.

"Okay." she said.

"I'll get some more."

"Thanks."

"Cassie."

"Yes."

"I love you."

She smiled, to him or to herself or to the wall: it is never clear. Cassie's love emanated in all directions. He wanted to contain it and keep it for himself but there were holes in his bucket. Mike trundled the barrow around to the rockpile.

At the north side of the garden, Jo and Angus had linked two of the screening trees by ropes about eight feet above the ground. As Mike rounded the corner they were edging from tree to tree, feet on one strand while holding onto the other. Mike stopped to explain to them the danger of the manoeuvre but he did not forbid them or check the knots. The two children continued to explore the trees. Cal wandered around the foot of the tallest tree with a yellow plastic briefcase and a stick. He had removed his boots. His socks were matted with mud.

Mike felt a spark of irritation at their absorption but could not quite put his finger on what they were doing wrong. Cassie would know. Cassie would put her finger on the exact transgression. The socks probably. Or damaging the trees. Something that just evaded his notice, something significant. And he would defend them, protesting their reasonable innocence because they were his kids, because he was never there, because he couldn't see it himself. It was probably the socks. Shoes. Cal should have shoes on.

As the next rock landed in the pile in the barrow, it fractured and split. It was a muddy rock, dense and ovoid and grey-brown except where it had broken open. There its surfaces were striated, toothed like sharkskin and galaxies of mica picked up the winter light and twinkled. Mike stopped to examine the texture and the colours which had been unknown for three hundred million years within the dense interior stillness of the stone.

"What you looking at?" Jo spoke from above his head.

"What's in the stone?" she asked.

"Mica," he pointed. "Hornblende. Feldspar and quartz."

"What are those?"

"Different kinds of stone. Minerals"

"You mean there are stones inside the stone?"

"Granite's made up of lots of different kinds of minerals."

"Why were you looking at them?"

"I just thought they were beautiful."

"Can I see?"

She tumbled forward, hanging by both arms beneath the branch before dropping the six feet to the ground. She landed heavily.

"Let me see."

Mike handed her the stone.

"Can I keep this?"

"Of course."

Jo wandered off. When Mike returned, empty, from his next trip he found Jo and Angus belabouring various rocks with a three pound lump hammer. Splinters of stone spun through the air.

"Look. Take some stones and do that somewhere else," Mike said.

"Will you move a barrow load of them to our den?"

"Yes."

The children began to pile selected rocks into the wheelbarrow which Mike trundled to a makeshift boma of bent sticks and cardboard. He dumped the load and returned to his task.

He began to think about Jung, whom he had been re-reading. He was thinking about Jung's proposition that western man sees only particulars, being ego-bound and thing-bound, unaware of the deep root of all being.

"Son, you need tae get out more," said the Badger on his last trip offshore.

"It's a fuckin' oilrig, Badger. Where the fuck am I supposed to go?"

"Fair do's, wee man. Bit fuckin' Jung. Could ye no try Irving Welsh? Or fuckin' Jim Kelman? He's good. 'Ve ye tried Kelman?"

"I always took you for a Tom Clancy man myself," Mike said.

"Clancy. Fuckin imperialist proceduralist shite. That's jist patronising, Logan. I am real particular about whit I injest into ma body and ma mind. An appropriate diet is essential for the transformation of the self and the society we inhabit excuse me. Says so in your Thich Naht Hahn. Ma body is a

fuckin temple, Logan. It's jist aw covered in fuckin scaffoldin at the moment..."

Right enough, Badger. Right enough. But Mike didn't get out more. He came back to this. The wife, the kids, the view down a rain-swept valley. And his mind ground on like a millstone in Gaza. Where did that come from? Oz and one of his fucking charades.

At home there was nothing to do but think. Mike thought of Cassie and he thought of Oz, the big man in the big house down the valley and he thought of the pair of them together and he just wanted to be out, off and away again down the winding road to the coast, to Aberdeen, to the heliport. Just off out from around the both of them. Not that there was anything to fear : was there? Not now that Oz had bought himself a wife. It was just an attraction. Like gravity between two big rocks. Pheromones. Something. That and Mike's negligence.

At the far side of the house, Cassie was adding tier upon tier of graded stones into her emergent dyke. As he turned the corner of the house she was resting back on her haunches, a long block of stone in her gloved hands, considering her next move. The dyke was eight yards long now, fully built at its left-hand extremity but graduated down to only the foundation blocks to its right.

"Stuck."

"No. Just thinking. I need more flat ones. Can you pick flat stones?"

"Coming on."

"Isn't it."

He sat on the ground beside her and shared in her examination of the ordered stones.

"We need to backfill those sections soon or the kids will push them over," she observed.

His exertions had left him warm and moist and aching. He looked at the wall and saw a pile of stones and a pretence at order, improbable randomness, information.

"Looks good," he said.

"We won't get it finished."

"You know, if I'd wanted to be a civil engineer I wouldn't have studied so hard."

She reached out with a gloved hand and the rough tips of her fingers stroked his cheek, smearing red earth like blood and he turned his lips into the leather palm.

Then Angus screamed.

Mike scrambled directly up the banked terraces of the garden to find newly fractured granite surfaces spotted with blood, as was the dull grey metal of the lump hammer. Angus was running among the trees, his right hand raised and shaking so that the blood streamed down this fingers and spilled to his wrist where it was cast off in vivid droplets. Jo pursued him at

a distance, unsure how best to comfort him and to distance herself from his injury.

Mike caught the boy up and clutched him to his chest.

"Shh. Shh. What have you done. Let me see. It's alright. It's alright. Calm down. Let me see."

"Daddy. Daddy!" Angus held his gaze to command his full attention. " It's not alright."

"Let me see."

The child's fingertip was burst to the second knuckle. The nail hung by a shred of skin. Blood welled up. Mike took him to the tap and ran cold water over the wound. Angus screamed again.

"Jo. Get me some toilet roll. No. Get that flannel. How many fingers did you hit? Angus. Was it just the one? Here, wrap this round. Is it throbbing? Angus."

Then Angus fainted.

All the way into Aberdeen Mike had been filled with this bliss. Angus sat in the back, hand wrapped up in a blood-soaked towel, moaning consolations to himself and biting his lower lip. Mike crashed the gears and straightened curves all the way to the coast, swerving to miss oncoming cars and tractors, flashing lights at the slow moving. He hadn't driven so fast since Cassie was last in labour and at least this time he was sober.

He kept casting phrases across his shoulder like lucky salt. "You OK son? You alright?"

"Feel sick," Angus said.

"No don't be sick. Breathe."

Mike wound down the window. The cold air streamed in through the car, chilling the boy.

"Dad. It's cold."

"Better."

"Cold! Shut the window, Dad."

"OK. Hang in there Angus."

And Angus hung on for his dear little life, beginning to feel this was all a wee bit over the top. At the hospital there were no parking places consistent with the concept of emergency. Mike walked his son around to the front entrance and checked him in. They sat in the waiting room, a sparse assembly of Sunday footballers and DIY disasters providing the only diversion from the 17 posters exhorting abstinence from drink, drugs, cholesterol and unprotected sex. Mike liked modern hospitals. They seem friendlier and cleaner than when he was a child. The nurses wore blue and the doctors wore green and it was all ergonomic and unencumbered and "Hi, my name is Sylvia, I'm your triage nurse, what seems to be the matter." Mike presumed if you didn't answer you were left for dead - "this one is a category 3 Alison! Just a cut finger...O that looks sore!" Well yes. And there were all these helpful lines on the polished floor: the yellow line led to radiography, the blue line led to plaster. Where did the black line lead? "Maybe it leads to the morgue son, what do you think?" Some ancient hollowed woman was trolleyed by along the black line. Mike regretted his joke. The trolley was abandoned opposite the little cubicle where Angus and

he awaited sutures. Mike didn't want his son to see the dry corridor air pull the moisture from her body like a desert wind.

"So Angus. What's your project? In the school?"

"Vikings," the boy said.

"Vikings. Again?"

"I've never done Vikings. That was Jo."

"Vikings. That's exciting. Have you read the Icelandic sagas?" Mike asked.

"No. We've got a book."

"There is a character in the Saga of Burnt Njal called Ragnar Hairybreeks. Imagine growing up with a name like Ragnar Hairybreeks."

"Could be worse Dad," Angus sneered, bored with this line of enquiry. "Could be called Jocasta."

"Your mother chose that name for Jo. Not me."

"You didn't stop her."

"What's your favourite name then?"

"Erik Bloodaxe! He was in the varangian guard you know?"

"In Byzantium. Yes. I saw the movie. "

"Really. There's a movie? Can we get it on DVD?"

"Maybe," Mike said. "Maybe."

"Dad?"

"What?"

"When you going away again?"

"Ages. Another week."

"That's not ages."

"Yes it is. It's a while anyway. Look. Here comes the doctor."

But he could have mistaken her for a schoolgirl were it not for the green fatigues. She wore thick soled trainers like Jo, his daughter. Mike supposed she must be qualified.

Angus averted his eyes during the procedure but Mike forced himself to watch.

Outside, an hour later, the temperature has fallen below zero. A million moments of frost dusted the lampposts, the pavements, the branches of the trees. He took Angus into town for a fish supper which he broke up so that his son could eat one-handed whilst Mike drove back out of the city glare into the enveloping darkness of the country. As Mike sped the car through its tunnel of light, the lad nodded off to sleep, the mess of chips still scattered on his lap.

Then there was only this, the darkness and the draught from the cracked open quarter-light, Mike awake and taking up the load. Everyone else asleep, everyone in the turning world gone off and Mike at the wheel.

Back home at Cassie's house at Tom Chairraig the peachy warmth of the lamps flooded from the windows and out across the terraces. It bounced, dazzling, off the frosted chippings on the track, gleamed on the icy fence-posts. Mike dug his boy out from his drift of carbohydrate litter and carried him in and upstairs.

Cassie was on the top landing, towelling her hair. Angus hung limp in Mike's arms, drooping, secure.

"How is he?"

"Stitches. Nothing broken. He needs to go back to see about his nerve."

"His nerve?"

"In the fingertip. He might have injured it. They couldn't tell."

Mike laid his son out beneath the duvet and propped his injured hand with pillows.

"He's OK. An ugly scar. That's all. Maybe a bit of numbness. At the tip."

"The fingertip?"

"Yeah. Can't tie knots. He'll be shite at back fastening bras. It could be worse."

"You never take things seriously do you?"

"I take everything seriously. Here."

He took her by the waist and pulled her to him. She was warm and moist from the bath. He was tired and wiry and the father of his son.

"Here." He pulled her close.

"Don't here me." She bridled then relaxed into his hug.

"Thanks. I couldn't have done that. Don't do blood," she said.

"I know. I do." His hand covered her breast. "Heroics always make me horny. You know that."

"I know. So?"

"C'mere."

"Where?"

"Outside."

"It's freezing out there."

"There was that time. Do you remember? In the snow?" Mike said.

"No way!"

"Anyway it's not that. Just come and look at something."

Outside, in the dark dark sky, a god's-honest comet was painting its fairytale veil across a ground of stars, its numb energy rushing through the aching want of space. Mike turned Cassie around to face it.

"Angus pointed it out earlier," he said. "I hadn't thought to look."

Cassie stared up, her dressing gown pulled tight around her. "It's amazing," she said.

"I'd like to name it after you," he said.

"I think it's got a name."

"Not for me."

"It's cold up there," she said.

"Too cold to notice."

Stones littered the gravel apron all around them. Mike crouched to his knees and pressed his face into the shadow of her thighs, pulling aside the towelling robe. Her skin was all goosebumps.

"It's not too cold down here to notice," she said.

"Cassie?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"What for?"

"Don't know."

"Let it go," she said. "It's freezing. Come to bed."