

At Last

POPPY CONNOR-SLATER

I FLINCHED AS the freezing water began to spill over my wellies but I carried on wading in. A flock of oystercatchers that were bobbing up and down on the surface nearby were startled by my splashing and took off in a flurry of black and white, piping their alarm calls. The further in I got the harder it was to drag my legs through the water. When it hit my chest I felt almost winded by the cold and had to take a moment to breathe, and then I began to swim. Finally, I scrunched up my eyes and ducked below the surface.

At first when I opened my eyes the water stung them so much that all I could make out was a blur of the light coming from above. As I tried to blink the stinging away, the murky world began to come into focus and then I could see them – their shapes emerging from the dark. I stretched out my hands towards them.

As we pulled onto the dirt track all I could think about was my new sandals that were tucked up inside my suitcase in the boot of the car. They were shiny and black with a tiny heel and they were so beautiful. I looked out of the window at the dark water and the endless scrub that eventually jutted up into great mountains. What was the point in pretty sandals here?

“Look, you can see Grandma’s house now,” said Dad, gesturing to a cluster of little white houses that perched on the edge of the loch. We crept slowly down the track towards the water in silence until dad said, “You alright, Kat?”

I nodded, and turning to him saw that his eyes were red. I quickly looked back to the window.

We pulled up in front of the houses and dad turned off the engine. He hesitated for a moment and then tried to look me in the eye.

“Sure you’re ok?”

I nodded again.

“Ok. Let’s go in, shall we?”

As soon as I opened the car door the wind hit me, making my hair whip in my face and stick to my lip gloss. Dad went to the boot to lift out our suitcases and then knocked on the door of the cottage. It opened to reveal my grandma, wearing a flowery dress that I could remember from when I was almost a baby.

“Tony! Come in, come in,” she said as she drew dad in for a hug. She ushered him inside and then pulled me to her. “Oh, Kit-Kat, I think you grow a foot every time I see you!” Grandma smelled like baking. I wondered if there would be fresh bread and fairy cakes. There always used to be.

“You can have the spare room, Kat,” she whispered with a wink. “Your dad’s been demoted to the sofa.”

“I heard that!” Dad called from down the hall. “Come on, I’ll help you take your case up.”

I followed him up the narrow staircase into a small, bright room. I could see the camping mattress that I used to sleep on folded up underneath the bedframe. I clambered onto the bed and looked out of the window.

“Gorgeous view, eh?” Dad said.

I could see Dad’s car and Grandma’s car, and then behind that a little path that led down to the pebble beach. The loch stretched on forever – so far that the mountains on the other side were a pale blue.

“If you had a boat and sailed in that direction,” Dad said, gesturing to the right, “you’d get to the sea after only five miles or so. Maybe we could all have a drive down sometime this week.”

I ignored him and continued to stare out of the window. Dad sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Look, Kat. I know that you wanted to stay in London and spend Easter with your friends. I’m just trying to do what’s best. I’m sorry, ok?”

“Dad, I’m fine,” I snapped.

“Ok. Ok. Well, I’ll leave you to unpack your stuff then, love,” he said, and headed back downstairs.

I waited a few moments and then crept to the top of the stairs. I could just hear the murmur of voices drifting up from the living room.

“She’s still awful quiet,” I heard Grandma say.

“I know. She barely talks to me,” Dad answered. “And then bringing her here... all I could think of on the drive was all of the times we’d made the journey before. With Sally. Maybe I’ve done the wrong thing.” I heard a stifled sob and I gritted my teeth.

“Tony, Tony,” Grandma stammered, “it’s ok. I think this will be good for us all, in the end.”

That night when I turned off my light it was so dark that I couldn’t see my hand when I waved it in front of my face, even when I opened my eyes as wide as they would go. It was strange, almost as if I wasn’t properly a part of my body. As I lay there I thought that I could hear the sound of gently lapping water floating in through the window.

In the morning I woke to see that a heavy fog had descended overnight, covering my window with a haze of tiny water droplets. I pulled a jumper on over my pyjamas and traipsed downstairs. Grandma was already in the kitchen, sitting at the table with a cup of tea. She smiled and got to her feet when she saw me.

“Morning, love. Let me get you a hot drink. Tea?”

“Please,” I replied, rubbing my eyes.

Grandma set about boiling the kettle and pulling boxes of cereal out of a cupboard.

“I’ll make one for your dad, too, in case he wakes up”, she said as she set a box of Frosties in front of me. “We’re going to go to town to get some shopping today. You can come if you like. We might get chips and eat them on the harbour.”

“Maybe,” I said as Grandma handed me my tea.

Over breakfast, Grandma asked me about school and if I was still taking dance classes, and then launched into a long story about how she'd had to help her neighbour rescue a baby cow that had got stuck in some deep mud.

"You always used to like animals, didn't you?" she asked.

"I guess so," I said.

"We've had so many seals along the loch recently. If you go and sit out there for an hour, I can promise that you'll see at least one. Sweet little things," she said as she stood and began to clear away the breakfast things. "Have you ever heard of selkies, pet?"

"No," I answered.

"Well, there's a little folktale around here that says they're these creatures that are a bit like mermaids. In the water they're seals – just like any other ordinary seal. But then when they come out of the water they shed their sealskin and take on the shape of a human."

I looked at her in surprise.

"I know, I know," she said. "It's a bit strange. My mam used to tell me that those we love who have passed on become selkies and watch over us. You know, a bit like angels."

Grandma smiled to herself as she leaned on the sideboard and gazed out of the window. I wondered if she was thinking about mum, living as some magical creature in the icy black water of the loch. I wished she'd never said anything.

I stayed behind when Grandma and dad went to get shopping. Grandma left me some sandwiches in the fridge and gave me a key in case I wanted to go for a walk, but said I wasn't to go too far. I lay on my bed and tried to read a book, but I just kept reading the same paragraph over and over again without the words going in. Then I tried to text my friend Laura but I only had one bar of signal and it kept failing to send. I knelt on my bed and looked out of the window. The mist was beginning to thin and I could see sunlight trying to break through it. Maybe I would go for a walk like Grandma had said. I went to the cupboard where I'd put all of my clothes. My sandals were sat there at the bottom, looking out of place. I'd only had a chance

to wear them twice so far. I sighed and picked up the Converse that were laid next to them.

The mist was almost gone completely by the time I got out of the house. I trudged down the grit path that led down to the pebble beach and then looked both ways, trying to decide which way to walk. I decided to go left, where I could see the bank pulling away from the beach and turning into cliffs. There was barely a breeze and the loch was very still, only lapping very slightly at the pebbles on the beach.

Once I had walked for a while, kicking pebbles as I went, and had put some distance between myself and the house, I stopped and found a rock to sit on. It was so quiet. No cars, no aeroplanes, no nothing. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a rounded shape disturb the stillness of the water. My heart began to beat a little faster and a forgotten excitement tried to stir inside me as I saw that a seal had poked its head above the surface only a few metres from the water's edge. Its shining, fluid body bobbed up and down, and then was joined by a second seal that appeared as if from nowhere. I held every muscle in my body as still as I could and barely dared to breathe. The seals looked in my direction for a minute or two, and I could see beads of water clinging to their whiskers, and then they continued their journey along the loch until I couldn't see them any more.

When I let myself into the cottage an hour or two later Dad and Grandma were already home.

"Look at your pretty white trainers! You've got mud all over them!" Grandma cried, "are these the most durable shoes you've got?"

I nodded, startled.

"What size shoe are you, pet?"

"Five" I replied.

"Ok, here, you can use my wellies", Grandma said, bustling over to the shoe rack, "they're a six but they'll be fine if you wear thick socks. I'll put them by the door for you. Now come with me and tell me about your day. Did you see a seal?"

Before I'd realised what I was doing I'd told Grandma all about the seals – described their large eyes and whiskery noses

and the way that they almost seemed to be made of the same stuff as the loch, and then I saw dad watching us from the doorway with a small smile on his face.

“Uh. Well, I’ve got some stuff to do. Homework,” I mumbled and headed for my room.

I woke up early the next day even though I hadn’t set an alarm. Grandma and Dad were both still asleep, so I quietly got myself some breakfast. Once I’d eaten I went to the front door and looked at the shoes all lined up. The wellies Grandma had lent me were a dull green and were dusted with dried mud. I pulled them on, wrapped myself in my coat and opened the door. It was windy today, and cold. I huddled into my coat as I made my way to the beach. I found a spot that was a little sheltered from the wind by the cliff and settled myself down. The water was steel grey and the wind was lifting it up in little peaks. Today the absence of human sounds seemed strangely loud. The sound of water on the pebbles, the wind on the waves and in the trees, and birds calling in the scrub behind me filled up my mind like white noise.

The sound of crunching pebbles startled me and I looked up to see Dad looking half asleep.

“I was worried about you,” he said as he reached me, “didn’t know where you were!”

“Just getting some fresh air,” I said, as I tried to bury deeper into my coat.

“Grandma said she thought you might be out here. Looking for seals?”

I stared across the water in silence.

“Here, I found these in the house,” Dad said as he handed me a pair of binoculars. “You’ll be able to see them better.”

I took them from him and held them to my eyes. The blurry circles sharpened as I turned the focus dial and then I could see the houses on the other side of the loch – I could even make out flowers in a window box and the shape of a bird table in someone’s garden.

“Don’t stay out too long, ok, love? You’ll get cold. I’m making lunch for about one.”

I nodded at him and he took a moment to contemplate the loch before turning back toward the house. I leaned back against the cliff and focused the binoculars on the water and scanned around. The waves formed dark shapes all over the loch that I kept mistaking for creatures. I began to feel dizzy from the constant motion and set the binoculars down. I closed my eyes for a few moments and concentrated on the solidity of the ground beneath me. When I opened my eyes again I saw a group of seals making their way leisurely down the loch towards me, bobbing in and out of the water as they went. I quickly lifted the binoculars back to my eyes and tried to find the seals. Their dappled skin glistened in the grey light and they puffed sprays of water from their noses after they'd been under the surface. As they got nearer, one of them seemed to see me and stopped to have a look, and the others stopped soon after.

I lowered the binoculars and hooked the chord around my neck before I began to edge closer to the water, trying to move as quietly as possible. The first seal stayed suspended in the water, still staring. The others backed away slightly but seemed just as curious. Once I'd managed to get a couple of metres from the water's edge I lowered myself gently onto the pebbles. We regarded each other for what felt like a long time, and all of the sounds that had surrounded me before now faded away. Their eyes were as alert and expressive as a human's, and I felt almost as if we could have started talking to each other. Eventually the first seal broke the stillness and turned to look at the others. They all began to carry on in the direction that they had been going in, but they looked back a few times, as if still curious about me.

I came back to the beach every day and waited by the edge of the loch until the seals appeared. There was a different number every time, but there was always one seal in particular that stopped to look at me. Every day they got closer, and I felt like they had begun to expect me.

Dad had started to come down to the beach to bring me biscuits and flasks of hot tea, which I welcomed as the air was so bitter, but he never stayed for long. He said that he could

see me from the kitchen window. Sometimes he and Grandma went out on walks or to town, but I preferred to stay by the loch.

Two days before we were due to go home I went out as the sun was rising and sat in my usual spot on the beach. I waited patiently for hours but the seals didn't appear. I wouldn't go inside without seeing them so Dad had to bring me my lunch outside. I didn't feel like eating. The time went on and on and I went through countless flasks of tea and not one seal appeared in the water. Eventually the light began to drop and I could hear blackbirds singing their evening song and I had to go inside because my fingers were going numb. Dad and Grandma both came to the hall as I opened the door but I avoided their eyes, ran past them without taking off my coat or wellies, and went up into my bedroom and closed the door behind me before they could say anything.

All night I never felt quite awake or quite asleep. I just turned over and over while strange images and voices rushed through my head until I woke up, confused, in the bright daylight. I could hear the sound of the television downstairs and a noisy family walking by outside, and I realised it must be at least mid morning. I looked out of the window and saw that the sky was lined with heavy clouds, but that the sun was breaking through, lighting them up like a paper lampshade and making the loch shimmer.

I got out of bed and pulled my coat and wellies on right over my pyjamas before making my way downstairs.

"Kat?" Grandma called as she and Dad appeared in the living room doorway. "Let me get you some tea! Would you like breakfast?"

I ignored her and made my way to the front door and out onto the path. I heard Dad's heavy steps coming after me.

"Kat, won't you eat something? You didn't have dinner! Where are you going?" he shouted after me.

"Leave me alone!" I spat over my shoulder. Dad's footsteps stopped and I ran down to the beach alone.

I huddled at the edge of the loch with my knees drawn up to my chin, not taking my eyes from the rippling surface of the

loch. Sometimes I heard people passing on the beach, and once Grandma came to try and get me to come inside, but I never once looked away.

When I felt like I'd been sitting there for an eternity something flickered in the periphery of my vision. A shiver ran through my body as I saw three seals swimming towards me at last. I rushed forwards almost involuntarily and splashed right into the waves.

Just as my fingertips brushed the seal's silky nose I felt the water drag my body down and around, knocking the air out of my lungs until I wasn't sure which way up I was. A stream of bubbles coming from my own mouth obscured my vision and I couldn't see the seals or the surface any more. The panic made my head swim and my blood pounded loud in my ears.

Then I felt a fog begin to flower in my brain and the noise and the whirling slowed and stopped all together. From within the haze of bubbles and fractured light I saw brown eyes smiling at me and felt a soft hand on my cheek. I smiled back as the world began to slowly dissolve.

Someone was shouting my name when my head broke the surface. I gasped huge lungfuls of air even though salty water droplets burnt my throat. Big hands were dragging me through the water and the roaring of the air and the world surrounded me. I looked up and saw Dad's pale frowning face. When the water became shallower he lifted me up completely and I wrapped my arms tight around his neck.

Now that I was above the surface the water looked deceptively calm. I stared at it over Dad's shoulder, willing myself to be able to see through the grey waves.

"It's ok. you're ok," he mumbled.

The wind bit my damp skin and I began, at last, to cry.