



## CHAPTER 1 - WHERE MY LONG-CHERISHED DREAM IS FINALLY REALISED PLUS I GET TO MEET A KANGAROO

I pull back the hastily tacked-up curtain on our new bedroom window and look out at the unbelievable vista of unending sea and sky before me. In the clear, painterly light of a cold April sun, I look down the hillside at a breathtaking panoramic landscape laid out in front of me like a camera obscura. Rugged sheep-grazing scrub quickly gives way to gently undulating fields which, in turn, flow down the placid slope of Snaba Hill like a river towards an ice-blue sea, where monochrome oyster catchers with bright orange bills dig patiently for sand worms on a narrow strip of pure white beach.

I can't believe it. After over six years on a drab Manchester inner-city housing estate, praying for a change, our goal has finally been realised and I am actually standing surveying an Orkney landscape. The lure of islands is, of course, as old as time itself, but most would-be downshifters dream of retreating to warm Mediterranean destinations when urban life gets to be too much. However, my own personal hankering has always been for the cold, clear light of the far North, and intoxicated from an early age by the razor-sharp lines and Arctic-colour-palette of post-impressionist painters like Stanley Cursiter, and later, the romantic writings of George MacKay Brown, my ultimate Utopia has always been the Orkney Islands, and here, now, this day, on a cold, clear morning in April 1999, we have finally arrived.

Suddenly, an irate snort jerks me out of my euphoric reverie, and I look around amidst the untidy piles of packing cases to a disgruntled hump on the bed that seems to be trying to communicate with me.

"Would you shut those bloody curtains, you're letting light in," the hump barks in a voice that sounds remarkably like my girlfriend, Chancery's. "It's far too early in the morning for daylight."

"But it's a fantastic morning and we're here, I mean, not just any old here, but *here*, here. You know, Orkney," I protest, but the hump is unswayable, so I let the curtain drop again, plunging the room into darkness, and then quickly push my head under the drapes so that I can still see out of the



window, frightened that my new El Dorado will be gone if I let it out of my sight for more than a couple of minutes.

However, the sky is still reassuringly ice blue and a stiff breeze is making some thin white clouds race southwards, and, as I try to breathe it all in, I remember just how long it has actually taken me to reach the stage in my life where I can finally call all this home.

I had, in fact, tried to make my first pilgrimage to the dark islands at the tender age of seventeen, when, having just obsessively devoured my Penguin Jack Kerouac Omnibus in the first week of the school summer holidays, I had decided to personally re-enact *On the Road* and hastily packed some watercolours and a change of underpants into my rucksack and hitchhiked up the old A9 to John O' Groats from my home town of Dundee, guided only by a sketchy map my mother had got free from saving tokens on the backs of Batchelor's soup packets.

Hell-bent on a pilgrimage round the isles, I nevertheless discovered that I had missed the last ferry and, with the impulsiveness of fickle youth, decided to hitchhike down to Land's End and the promise of Cornish nude beaches instead. But this morning, almost thirty years later, the urge for the Orkneys is still with me, and today is to be the first day of our new life in the isles, a land seemingly fairly close to home, being only some twenty miles from the north east tip of the Scottish mainland, yet so alien in geography and culture as to be on a different planet.

In fact, the whole place is so different from anything that I've ever encountered before that there's even a kangaroo on the grass in front of the house.

What?

I shake my head to clear my thought processes, muddled from the long journey north, but, no, it's a bit small but it's definitely a kangaroo. I look out, incredulous, and cautiously meet its eye and the kanga looks back.

Unblinking.

"What?" it seems to say.

I run quickly back into the room and shake the hump violently.



“Wake up, wake up, there’s a kangaroo on the lawn!” I cry, and an incredulous face surfaces from beneath the duvet.

“We haven’t got a lawn, and there certainly isn’t a kangaroo on it,” the face says very patiently. “Come back to bed.”

“But there’s a kangaroo...”

“Trust me, there are *no* kangaroos in Orkney. I’ve read all the guide books,” the face mutters wearily, sliding back down to its warm place in the dark folds of bedding.

“Well, one of those little kangaroos things then...” I protest.

“Wallabies?” the face says, reappearing.

“Yes, that’s it, a wallaby. There’s a wallaby on the lawn,” I cry emphatically, “you have got to come and see this. It’s too fantastic to miss. And there are sheep and clouds and flying feathered things too.”

Chancery sits up and eyes me coldly. “By ‘flying feathered things’ I suppose you mean birds?” she says carefully and I nod. “Listen, there are going to be lots of ‘flying feathered things’ here, so you’d better get used to it. I won’t tolerate you waking me every time you see a seagull in a field.”

“Ah, but what about the kanga?” I ask, playing my trump card. “Are there lots of *kangaroos* here too?”

Chancery, sleep murdered, gets up and staggers to the window, muttering, “If this is a joke...” as I triumphantly pull back the impromptu drapes and cry, “Ta-dah!”



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