

FRIDAY EVENING

Clarity.

That would have been good.

Instead, a cold, clinging mist. Not even mist; just a chill haze, drifting up the estuary. I'm standing fifty metres above the Firth of Stoun, in the middle of the road bridge, at the summit of the long, shallow trajectory it describes above the waters. Below, wind-stroked lines of breakers track up the firth, ragged creases of thin foam moving east to west under the steady push of the breeze; each wave forming, breaking, widening, then collapsing again before new crests start to rise amongst their pale, streaked remains, the whole doomed army of them vanishing like ghosts into the upriver blur.

Traffic moves on the northbound carriageway behind me; cars tearing, trucks rumbling and thumping over the expansion joints on the road surface. About half the cars and most of the trucks have their lights on as the evening, and the mist, close in.

I look up at the north tower of the suspension bridge, a double H shape rising another hundred metres into the murk, its grey flank stitched with little steady red lights. At the top there's a single aircraft beacon producing sharp bursts the blue-white of a camera flash. The mist smears each pulse across a whole grey tract of sky.

I'm wondering how well the cameras up there can see through the haze. I've been standing here for a couple of minutes, looking like a prospective jumper for all that time. Usually by now a wee yellow van would have been sent along the cycle track from the control centre at the south end of the bridge to come and make sure I'm not thinking of Doing Something Stupid, which is what people still seem to say when they don't want to say what they mean, which is Kill Yourself, or Commit Suicide.

Maybe cutbacks mean they've turned off the cameras, or there are just fewer staff to check the monitor screens, or they're sending guys out on foot or on a bike to save fuel. Which, by the time they get to the right place, would probably mean the poor, terrified, hesitant wretch has already gone, to become just another streak of foam on the waves below. There are a lot of exits like that off the bridge but they rarely get reported because every time one is publicised there's a handful of copycat suicides within the week. Which makes you wonder what these pitiful tribute artists would have done otherwise: taken pills, dived under a train or somehow soldiered on, too mired in their hopeless lives to think of a suitable way out for themselves?

Amongst us kids, growing up here, the story – delivered

from the mouths of dads and big brothers who worked either on the bridge or for the coastguards, or just those who claimed to know about such things – was that the fall didn't kill you; it just smashed all your major bones and knocked you out. If you were lucky, you drowned before you regained consciousness; if not, you got to thrash about as best you could with two broken arms and two broken legs before you drowned, unable to hold your face above water even if you'd changed your mind about dying in the meantime.

Or maybe you'd tied yourself to something heavy. That made it more definite, and you just vanished beneath the waves. We scared and excited each other with this sort of thing, attracted and repelled by anything grisly, like most kids. Though watching somebody getting beheaded on the web sort of had a greater immediacy, you had to admit.

Upriver, from here, you ought to be able to see the old road crossing and the rail bridge, five kilometres away to the west where the river narrows, and closer still you ought to get a good view of the Toun itself: the old and new docks, the retail and commerce parks, the dark central cluster of church spires and towers, and the peripheral scatter of pale high-rises in the housing estates, but the view dissolves into the mist before any of this is visible.

I look down at the waves again, wondering what Callum's last thoughts were as he fell towards the water, and whether he died without waking up, or had time to suffer. I suppose every class at every school, every year at every school, has a first person to die – suicide, road crash, whatever – just like there's a first person to get pregnant or father a child and a

first person or a first couple to get married. Callum wasn't our first death but he was our first suicide.

Our first death was Wee Malky, long ago. Well, not just our first death; something worse, in a way, but . . . well, it's complicated.

Our school days felt an age away by the time Callum vaulted the safety railings on the road bridge but we still all knew one another, all kept in some sort of contact, so it had an effect on every one of us. Even me, the exile; even I heard almost immediately and – despite everything, despite the fact he'd been one of those who'd have severely fucked me up if they'd got their hands on me – I felt shocked.

At the time I thought maybe I'd be invited back to that funeral, but I wasn't. Still too soon. Emotions too raw, my sins, or at least sin, unforgiven, the threats still hanging in the air.

The mist is still thickening, becoming what the locals call haar and threatening to turn into rain. I'm starting to wish I'd brought a thicker jacket with a hood, not this thin fashion item. What *we* call haar, I guess, if I'm being honest; I'm still a local, I suppose, even though it's been a long five years. And I'm not contemplating suicide, though just coming back here might be a stupid and dangerous thing to do. I'm where I am right now so I can check out exactly how stupid and dangerous it might be.

And here comes a wee yellow bridge van, orange roof-light flashing and headlights twinkling through the mist as it drives up the grey-pink cycle track beside the grey-green pedestrian path.

I'm here to meet somebody, I think about telling whoever's driving the van, as it approaches. I might even know them: an old school friend. The wipers flick once, slowly, clearing the moisture gathering on the van's screen as it pulls up alongside. Two guys in it. Normally only one, I thought. In my current slightly paranoid state, that seems a little worrying. I get a tiny pulse of apprehension in my guts. The nearest man, the passenger, rolls down his window. A square, smooth, yet hard-looking face above a thick neck and bulky shoulders; bulky shoulders not clad in a high-visibility jacket, unlike the driver of the van. Small, recessed blue eyes, eyebrows darker than the buzz of lion-coloured hair covering his scalp.

It's Powell Imrie, the man I'm here to meet. I'm still not sure whether to be relieved or terrified.

'All right, Stu?'

I nod. I hate it when people call me Stu. 'Powell.'

He looks up, grimaces. 'Coming on to rain,' he says, then jerks his head. 'Jump in the back.'

I hesitate, then go to the rear of the van and open one of the doors. The yellow-painted metal floor has raised corrugations, scuffed a rust brown; I'll be sharing the back with traffic cones and emergency-light clusters. The haar coats one side of my face with cold droplets and it's getting chilly. It's a ten-minute walk back to the viewing area where I parked the car; maybe more.

'Jump in,' Powell repeats, from inside. Pleasantly enough.

'Aye, just shift stuff out the way,' the van's driver says. He's older than me and Powell. I don't recognise him. Powell was

in my year at school, the biggest, toughest boy in the class, partly because he'd been held back a year. He was only ever casually a bully, as though even intimidating other kids was too easy, somewhat beneath him. He never actually hit me, though like everybody else I was certainly quite sufficiently intimidated, and always treated him with at least as much respect and deference as I did the more formidable teachers. Powell still commands respect and deference now; more, in fact. And he is one person I don't want to get on the wrong side of, if this visit is either going to happen at all or be safe, be any sort of success.

On the other hand, the floor of the van is kind of grimy-looking and I'm wearing a decent pair of slate-grey Paul Smith jeans and an Armani jacket, plus, after I left this place – after I had to leave this place, after I was pretty much run out of this place – I swore I was done with being manipulated and told what to do.

Outside of work, obviously. And one or two relationships.

I don't get in. I close the door again and look round the side of the van to Powell's frowning face. 'I'll walk,' I tell him, and start towards the south end of the bridge, retracing my steps. This could be really stupid. My mouth has gone dry. I hope my steps look steady.

After a moment the van whines backwards, reversing to keep pace with me. Powell's face wears an expression somewhere between a sneer and a grin as he looks at me, taking in my clothes. 'Too manky in there for ye, aye?' Powell always had one of those deep, carrying, slightly gravelly voices. It's gritty rather than gravelly now; he must have stopped smoking.

'I need the exercise,' I tell him, and keep on walking. I'm

not looking at him but I hear what might be a snort. He says something to the driver and the van stops. I leave it behind as I keep on walking.

After a few moments I hear doors slamming. Three slams. Shit, I have time to think.

Then, while I'm paranoid-fantatising about being picked up and thrown off the bridge by three guys, one of whom I somehow missed, the van's engine roars and it comes tearing past me, transmission whining even louder. I wonder if – as I tumble towards the waves – I'll have time to get the iPhone out, hit Facebook and change my status to 'Dead'. The wee yellow van jerks to a stop and the passenger door is opened.

I look inside. Powell is in the driver's seat now, massive mitts gripping the steering wheel. He's smiling thinly at me. The bridge employee who was driving is in the back, sitting on the floor surrounded by road cones and holding onto the back of the empty passenger seat. He doesn't look over-pleased.

'Happy now?' Powell asks.

'Cheers,' I tell both of them, and get in. Below, just appearing from under the deck of the bridge, a small brown tug is heading upstream, its blunt bows punching through the grey waves of the firth.

'No really supposed to do three-point turns, Mr Imrie,' the bridge worker in the back says, as Powell shuffles the van back and forth to point back the way it came. 'One-way, kinda thing.'

Imrie just ignores him, seemingly taking some pleasure in

gunning the engine, whirling the wheel and taking both ends of the van alarmingly close to the railings on either side of the combined cycle and pedestrian path. It's actually a five-point turn, but that's not the sort of thing you'd choose to point out to somebody like Powell Imrie.

'You well, Stu?' he asks as we speed back down the path.

'Yeah, fine,' I say. 'You?'

'Um, there's sort of a limit, Mr Imrie,' the guy in the back says as we start to overtake traffic on the far side of the bridge.

'Don't worry,' Powell says smoothly to the guy in the back, turning his head a little, still accelerating. He flashes a smile at me. 'Dandy,' he says. 'Just dandy.' He looks at my jeans and jacket again. 'Doing all right, are we?'

'Not broke,' I agree.

Powell is also dressed in jeans, though his are the more conventional blue. Topped off with a white tee and a padded tartan lumber shirt, predominantly red, with expensive-looking earbuds dangling on short leads from a breast pocket. He looks tanned, and fit and solid as ever, his massive shoulder almost touching mine across the van's cab. He was probably the strongest boy in the school when he was still in third year the first time. Star of the rugby team.

We're still gathering speed, the bars of the railings on my side blurring past less than half a metre away. Squinting through the mist, it looks like there's a couple of people on bikes pedalling their way up the shallow slope of the bridge towards us, a hundred metres dead ahead.

'Um,' the guy behind us says, 'think there's folk on the cycle path, Mr Imrie.'

'Haven't got a siren on this thing, have you?' Powell asks him.

'Naw, Mr Imrie.'

'Shame. Aw well.'

He starts to brake and we pass the cyclists at a sedate fifty or so, though – largely by flashing his headlights at them insistently – he still forces them to swerve over to the pedestrian side of the track. They stop, standing astride their bikes and staring at us as we race past. Imrie waves cheerily.

'How's Ellie?'

'She's fine. Take it you know about Callum.'

'Yeah, of course. Not totally out of touch.'

Powell looks appropriately solemn for a moment, then grins. 'Your mum and dad been keepin you up to date with all the local gossip, aye?'

'Mostly.'

We're sitting in Powell's black Range Rover Sport in the viewing area near the bridge control centre. My more modest hired Ford Ka is a couple of bays away. For some reason when we arranged our arguably melodramatic meeting in the middle of the bridge, I'd thought he would park at the north end and walk over while I did the same from the south, but he must have driven past me and parked here. Obviously hasn't watched the same old Cold War movies I have. The Rangie's engine purrs, barely audible, wafting a little warm air into the gently lit interior, all soft leather and hard wood. The wipers sweep smoothly every few seconds, giving us an intermittently good view of the twin streams of red and white lights flowing across the bridge.

'So, Stewie,' Powell says, making a gesture a bit like he's opening a book with his massive but manicured-looking hands. 'What was it you wished to discuss?'

I hate the name Stewie even more than Stu. I hated it as a kid and these days all it makes me think of is *Family Guy*. I like *Family Guy*; I just don't like being bracketed with a melon-headed, homicidal, über camp baby with inappropriate diction. And I only asked for a chat, just to make sure everything was cool, not to 'discuss' anything. But still. I look him in the eye. 'Am I okay to come back, Pow?'

Powell smiles. He's had his teeth fixed. Dazzling. Cee Lo Green has dimmer gnashers. I'd thought at this point he might look all innocent and uncomprehending, maybe even hurt, pretending there had never been any problem, but he doesn't. Instead he looks thoughtful, nods.

'Aye,' he says, drawing the word out. 'As well to check, I suppose, eh?' He smiles tolerantly. 'You were never one of the daft ones, were you, Stu?'

I raise my eyebrows at this. Better than saying, One of the *daft* ones? I'm one of the dead fucking *smart* ones, you overstuffed, upgraded bouncer. Though not so smart I didn't do something that got me run out of town, admittedly, so maybe he does have a point after all. Plus, for somebody we all confidently predicted would reach his life-peak standing outside a club rejecting people wearing the wrong sort of trainers, or being Thug Number One on a prison wing, Powell's done pretty well for himself. So who am I to talk?

Powell nods wisely. 'Aye, best to check. Feelings were runnin high an all that, eh?'

I just crease my mouth and nod a little. Powell's about to say something else when his phone sounds suddenly with a snatch of Tinchy featuring Tinie. It's 'Gangsta?', which probably represents high wit to Powell. The Rangie's Bluetoothed screen wakes up with a single name I can't make out before Powell's hand flicks out and he stabs a button on the steering wheel, rejecting the call.

He winks at me. 'So, frightened about coming back, were you?'

I squeeze out a tight little smile. 'Concerned. Didn't want to make anybody feel uncomfortable.'

'Aye, well,' he says, sporting a fuller grin than mine. 'I've had a word with Mr M, just to check you're *persona grata*, you know?'

Powell looks very pleased with himself for knowing this phrase. He's a man it's easy to dismiss intellectually, given his looks and size and just the way he carries and expresses himself sometimes, but he always could play a lot dumber than he is, and even when he was kept back that year at school he let it be known he had done this deliberately, for his own good reasons, the better to dominate all around him.

A few people scoffed a tad too publicly at that and paid for it. Only the first one had to cough up blood and a tooth; the others suddenly found it necessary to contribute a tenner or so to Powell's never-to-be-used-for-its-stated-purpose college fund. That was the thing about Powell, even then: he didn't mistake fear for respect, however grudging; he knew where to draw the line, and he certainly never enjoyed violence so much he'd prioritise it above a decent payday. He might

have been educationally challenged, but he was always destined to do well with a certain sort of organisational hierarchy around him.

There's movement outside his window. Black-and-white check pattern. Jeez, it's the cops.

Powell swivels, grins, thumbs the window down. 'Douglas, that you?' he asks the uniform standing in the light rain outside.

'Evening, Mr Imrie,' the cop says. I think I recognise the face but I'm not sure.

Powell laughs. 'What you doin this side of the firth, Dougie? This is fuckin bandit country for you guys, is it no?'

'Aye,' the officer says with a sheepish grin. He nods towards the bridge control buildings. 'Over seein the bro-in-law; he's a rigger.'

Powell looks down at him. 'I'd invite you in,' he says. 'But you're dripping.'

'Naw, it's all right.' He stares in at me. His face scrunches up a little. 'Stewart?' he asks.

Werrock. Dougie Werrock. That's his name. Year or two below us. I nod. 'Hi, Dougie. Officer Werrock.' I glance at Powell.

'That your Ka over there, Stewart?' Dougie asks.

'Aye. Hired.'

'Saw that. Left your sidelights on, sir,' he says, with a professional expression.

'Did I? Thanks. Thought I heard an extra beep or two. Shouldn't be a problem. I'll be on my way shortly anyway, should think,' I tell him, with another glance at Powell.

'Right you are.' Officer Werrock gives me a sort of half-nod.

Powell merits a full nod and even a touch of hand to cap. 'Nice to see you, Mr Imrie,' Dougie says, then turns.

He's a couple of steps away when Powell leans out and says, a little more quietly, 'Aw, Dougie. Did we get that wee . . . ?'

I can just about make out what Dougie says. 'Eh? Oh. Aye. Aye, that's all . . . That's been . . . No, we're fine there.'

'Splendid. Hunky McDory. Right, Dougie. Mind how you go.' Dougie walks off through the drizzle. Powell runs the window back up and sighs. 'Cunt,' he breathes, though he sounds almost affectionate.

I look at him.

'Where were we?' He sighs, pinches his nose. 'Oh yes. Aye, you're clear to land, Stewie-boy. No harm scheduled to befall. Not at our hands, anyway. You're still not on Mr M's Christmas list, and he'd appreciate a wee visit, maybe this evening, just so you can pay your respects, but no; you're fine.' He leans over and, with one enormous fist, punches me very gently on the thigh. It really is gentle, more of a push than a punch, but I can still feel the power behind it. 'Appreciate you asking first, though,' he tells me, winking. 'Smart thing to do.' He sits back, stretches a little as he looks through the just-cleared screen, as though some formality has been dealt with, before looking back at me. 'You here long?'

'Just the weekend.'

'For Joe's funeral, aye?'

'Aye, for the funeral,' I tell him. 'Joe asked for me to be there, be here, himself,' I add, still feeling I need to justify myself, or at least my presence. As soon as I say it I wish I

hadn't; it sounds like I'm pleading. I bite my lip, stop doing that, then feel like I'm starting to blush. *Jeez, I tell myself. Make it all obvious, why don't you?*

Powell appears oblivious. 'Uh-huh. You know the time's changed?'

'No.'

'Still Monday, but it's been brought forward to eleven.'

'Oh. Right.'

'Aye. Mrs M didn't want to change the time of her keep-fit class.'

I look at him. He keeps a neutral expression, then just shrugs. He clears his throat and says, 'Staying at your folks', aye?'

'Yes, I am.' I put my hand on the door handle, then hesitate. 'Any special time Donnie wants me at the house?'

'Naw.' Powell looks at his watch, which is something wide and bling and might have cost more than the Range Rover. 'Just head on up now if ye want. I'll no be there; stuff to do, but I'll phone ahead. See you around, eh?'

'Aye, see you around.' I open the door. A few drops of rain swirl in. It looks like the sky is brightening, though that might be just the contrast with the Rangie's tinted windows. I get out and stand looking in at Powell. 'Thanks, Pow,' I tell him.

He looks pleased at this, so it was probably worth the small amount of self-esteem it cost me. He winks again. 'Say hi to your mum and dad, eh?' he says.

'Will do.'

The door closes with a thud so solid I could believe there's some armour in there. For all I know, there is. Powell's Range

Rover burbles off into the evening while I walk over to my
hire car.

The still-on sidelights welcome me, reproachful.

Five minutes later I'm driving into Stonemouth.

The quickest road from the bridge to the Murston house doesn't go through the centre of town. I almost take the slower route anyway, just to see what's changed over the last five years, but the traffic's heavy enough coming off the bridge and on all sides of the big roundabout beyond, so I take the Erscliff road and end up going past the old High School. It's still there: three tall stone storeys and a Community College now; fewer outbuildings and huts than in our time, plus a bit sprucer, and grass where the tarmac playground used to be. We were there for only a year before we were moved to the achingly modern new school at Qualcults, on the other side of town.

I first saw the Murston house from a couple of the higher classrooms in the old school. It nestled in a little hollow between the two curved tops of a small hill a couple of kilometres away, just on the outskirts of town towards the

sea. What fascinated me about it then was that it was only from those two or three classrooms on the top floor of the school that you could see the place; from the other classrooms, the playground and all the various routes to school it was effectively invisible. The house sort of peeped out through the greenery crowding around it, half hidden by tall round trees bunched on either side like green eruptions of water. The trees were so dense that even when they unleafed in the autumn you hardly saw any more of the house hiding amongst them.

Sometimes in winter there was snow up there for days before any appeared on the ground in the town and the house seemed like some sort of half-mythical mountain palace. I thought it looked very grand, remote and mysterious; romantic even. A view that met with some incomprehension and even derision amongst my school pals.

'You *sure* you're no gay, Stu?' and 'That's old man Murston's crib, fuckwit,' were two of the more informative and useful comments. And of course you could see the house from various other places too: the top deck of the number 42 bus for a start, as it passed along Steindrum Drive, as a couple of people pointed out to me, and from Justin Cutcheon's mum's attic window if you stood on a crate.

Callum Murston denying it was his mum and dad's house when I pointed it out to him from Art Room Two didn't help demystify it either.

'Hey, Callum,' I said, 'isn't that your house up there, on the hill?'

Callum squinted, already frowning aggressively, and finally

saw where I was pointing. ‘Naw it’s naw,’ he said, sounding angry and looking like he was going to hit me.

Callum was never far from throwing a punch when he thought people were taking the piss. Which, to be fair, we were all prone to do, though not quite as often as Callum assumed we were. Almost any other kid in school would long since have been kicked into a less hair-trigger attitude, but Callum was a Murston (a fact we’d known since primary school meant something serious in Stonemouth), his elder brother Murdo was the biggest kid in sixth year – even if he rarely resorted to blows – and Powell Imrie – Stonemouth High School’s very own Weapon of Mass Destruction – had already sort of aligned himself with the Murston clan. That made Callum pretty much untouchable, even when he was in the wrong. Unless a teacher got involved, of course; Callum had already been suspended once for violent behaviour and was on verbal warnings almost constantly. And he really did look like he was winding up to belt me.

So I backed off immediately, smiling and holding up both hands. ‘Sorry, Cal. Chill.’

He still looked angry but he let me walk away.

Just another Callum Murston WTF? moment.

By that time I’d come to accept that the place was the Murston family gaff and I just assumed he was denying it to fuck with me or because he was oddly embarrassed at coming from what was obviously a very large house, but it turned out later he honestly didn’t recognise it from that angle, and his in-head sat-nav couldn’t do the maths required to work it out. Callum never was the sharpest chiv in the amnesty box.

All the same, it was largely because of the house glimpsed through the trees that I persevered in getting to know Callum and becoming one of his friends, and it was largely through Callum – and the just-deceased Joe – that I got to know the rest of the family: Mr M himself (a bit), Mrs M (a slighter bit), Murdo (a bit more), Fraser and Norrie, the twins from the year below (fairly well) and, of course, Ellie. And Grier, her kid sister; I got to know her too and we even became sort of friends. But Ellie, mostly. Ellie more than all the rest, Ellie more than anybody ever, until I fucked it all up.

The cloud is clearing a little as I swing the Ka between the tall, ornate gateposts of the Murston house, high on the hill. It's called Hill House, so no prizes for imagination there. A still-clinging haze to the east obscures the North Sea, and to the west the clouds glow yellow-orange and hide the north-eastern tip of the Cairngorms. The wrought-iron gates stay open these days, though they are electric and there is an intercom. The driveway snakes down through a broad slope of striped lawn studded with ornamental bushes and life-size statues of stags. I park between a sleekly silver four-door AMG Merc and a spanking-new green Range Rover.

The triple garage I remember has been joined by an added-on-looking fourth. There's a wee boxy Japanese van parked outside it. The van's filled with equipment and a compressor of some sort, hoses snaking into the open garage doorway. There's a big foamy wet patch on the forecourt and inside there's a monstrous pick-up truck. Its bonnet – hood – is as high as my shoulders. The badge says it's a Dodge. The machine

is truly vast; the new garage is wider and taller than the other three, as if built to contain the thing. The truck is gleaming: all massive chrome bull bars and deep, sparkling, flaked crimson paint with a rack of extra lights on a bar across the roof. Inside the four-door cab I can just see a Confederate flag stretched across the back. A guy in blue overalls appears from behind the truck and comes out, holding a duster. He frowns, then grins when he sees me. It's Stevie Ross, from the year above me at school.

'Hiya, stranger,' he says, and comes up and shakes my hand. There's some fast catching up – yes, me doing okay, thanks, him with this cleaning business, still playing in the band at weekends – and then I ask if the mega pick-up is Donald's new toy or one of the boys'.

'Nah, this was Callum's,' Stevie says, crossing his arms and staring at the thing. The registration plate reads RE8E1. Stevie looks proud and sort of reverent at the same time. 'Hasnae moved for two years, apart from me pulling it out to clean it every few months and then rolling it back in again.' He frowns at me. 'You know about Callum, eh?'

'Off the bridge,' I say, nodding.

'Aye,' he says, voice a little quieter. 'Well, this was his. This is what he left sitting on the bridge, night he jumped. Mr M had it brought up here, built this new garage for it. Keeps it nice.' He nods approvingly. He glances back at the house, looks at me. 'You okay to be here, aye?'

'Yeah. Yeah; come to pay my respects.'

He looks at his watch. 'Aye, well. Time to go. Got a stretch limo to clean for Party Wagons.' He shakes his head. 'Ye

wouldnae believe the mess a bunch of fourteen-year-old girls can leave one of those things in.'

'Don't envy you.'

'Aye, well, still; it's dependable work. Every other fucker's economising. Never mind. Good to see you, Stewart.'

'You too.' I leave him packing up and go to the front door.

A young Asian woman I don't recognise answers the bell and shows me into the remaining conservatory. There used to be two; the other one was knocked down to make room for the new wing, sometime around the Millennium. Mr Murston will be with me shortly.

The conservatory is big, full of cane furniture with Burberry cushions. Two gleaming, life-size ceramic cheetahs stand guard at the double doors from the house. The conservatory looks out south-west across a terrace with a giant trampoline to one side and some wrought-iron furniture. The trampoline has lots of brown leaves on it. The table holds a collapsed giant parasol, green and white. The trees surrounding the house are mostly turning yellow, orange and red. Beyond, down in the haze, I can just make out a sliver of the town. I stand looking at it for a while. I can hear a radio or iPod playing pop somewhere in the house. I listen for some sounds from the erratic population of wee yappy dogs Mrs M has always favoured, but I can't hear them.

After a few minutes I start to suspect I'm being put in my place by being made to wait, so I sit down, and wait. I pull out the iPhone. Normally I'd play a game or check emails, but all I do is Tweet where I am and put the phone away. Even that's just a sort of residual paranoia; despite an initial burst

of enthusiasm about a year or two ago, I never really got into Tweeting. I've taken it up again this weekend only as a security measure because I reckon there's a chance, however slim, that convincing some bad guys who might wish to do you harm that, thanks to the wonders of modern technology, people know exactly where you are/where you were last seen alive (you always assume the extreme when you're gaming these things in your head) will somehow put them off. Seems a bit ridiculous now, but there you go.

I sit, trying to identify the song playing frustratingly quietly in some other part of the house. It's something really old; KLF possibly. The coffee table in front of me has copies of *Vogue*, *Angling and Game, Fore!* and *Scottish Country Life*, though they all look unread. I open a couple and they still have the insert flyers inside. A hefty pair of binoculars sits on a windowsill.

Before I ever got to know the Murstons or got invited to their house, a gang of us set off on an expedition to check the place out one sunny Sunday afternoon. There was me, Dom Lennot, Al Dunn, Wee Malky and Bodie Ferguson. We were almost but not quite past the age of playing soldiers, and we might have been indulging in an outdoor version of Laser Quest (the town's own indoor arena, in an old bingo hall that had once been a cinema, had opened and closed within a year), or Paintball Frenzy (we were too young to use the real thing, on a farm near Finlassen) or possibly we were re-enacting some combat game. I wasn't allowed any computer games at home at the time so I got to play only on other kids' machines, but

maybe it was Call of Duty, if that existed at the time, so perhaps we were US Special Forces moving stealthily in on a Taliban leader's compound. Though, equally likely, we were mujahedin sneaking up on a US Marine base – we were kind of promiscuous that way.

Around the house were the sheltering trees, themselves surrounded by broad clumps of gorse and broom and, a little further down, tilted meadows where sometimes horses and sheep grazed. Lower down the hillside, beyond a straggled line of trees, lay the long, wavily manicured fairways of Jamphside Golf Club. We argued about whether to avoid the course altogether – it was only the second-most exclusive club in the area, but it was the most forbidding, surrounded by fences and great thickets of jaggy whin and bramble, fiercely patrolled by some very humourless and proprietorial ground staff. Having the effrontery to cross its sculpted, obsessively tended greens was not like louping across the scruffier municipal course down by the firth or even braving the dunes, gorse and sands of Olness, the older links course on the coast, cheerily pretending obliviousness to any distant yells from annoyed golfers. Still, we decided to go for it, crossing at what we were assured by Wee Malky was the narrowest part of the course – his granda had been a greenkeeper so he claimed local knowledge.

We found a way over a fence using a handy tree, used a sort of tunnel through the whin that was probably a deer route and got to the edge of the twelfth fairway to find there was only one group of golfers within sight, heading away from us. We'd probably have been fine except that Dom, who always