

## **The Flitting**

Dad sits opposite me at the kitchen table, still wearing his mud caked wellies. He never drops by unannounced. The sweet, cloying smell of the farm has followed him in. He sips his coffee and licks foam from his top lip.

Nixon's have done a flit.

A what? I ask.

Are you having a laugh?

I sit up straight and try to meet his gaze but my eyes hover around the tuft of hair creeping out of his right ear.

No Dad.

Fucks sake Ed. A flit is where people pack up everything and do one in the middle of the night.

He leans back in his chair and stretches his neck, turning it slowly left to right, then backwards and forwards until it cracks. I grip my cup with both hands, stare into the foam.

Why would they do that Dad? They were always-

Flush? Yeah, well it's not always money trouble.

What then? They love that farm.

He leans forward, rests his broad arms on the table. His checked shirt sleeves are rolled up, the knot of scar tissue on his right arm rippling. I watch a biscuit crumb travel from his top lip to his beard as he speaks.

All different now though isn't it. Harder. They're wasters. Too lazy to make a proper go of it. They didn't even bother with what was left of the herd, just left the gates open so they were wandering all over the road. Sent two cars into the ditch.

Shit.

Shit indeed. Anyway, that's why I came by. We need to round them up.

Round what up?

Are you deaf? Or just soft in the head? The cows.

I stare at the table, feel the familiar flush of heat rising in my cheeks. Dad stands, moves to the sink and pours the rest of the coffee down the plughole.

Rank this Ed. Dunno how you stomach it.

What will you do with them?

Keep them. No sense in them going to waste.

It's not right Dad.

What's not right is people giving up. Letting everything go to rot. I won't have it. No sense in them going to waste.

What if they come back?

Their loss.

I turn words of objection over in my head but my mouth is dry and my tongue glued to its roof.

Get your boots on, he barks. I'll wait in the car.

He turns to leave, sees the photo on the dresser and stops. My wedding. He didn't come. Too much to do on the farm. For a split second, I think I see a smile turn over but it's an illusion and



then he is outside and the stable door is banging in the torrid wind. I empty the coffee pot into the sink and push a digestive into my mouth. I slide my feet into my boots and reach for my hat but it's missing from its peg. His voice rattles up the driveway.

Hurry the fuck up.

I'll burn without it but it's nowhere to be seen. I scribble a note for James then leave, lever myself up into the passenger side of Dads car and we drive.

We take the main road out of town. He lets out a long breath when we climb the steep hill and pass over onto the moor.

Dunno how you cope down there, all them people around you.

There's not many people left. Everyone's moving down to the Newcastle settlement.

Still, it's not natural. You should have space around you. Space to live as you want to.

I do live as I want to.

If you say so.

I wind the window down and turn my face to the breeze. The wall creeps into view, snaking gap toothed along the ridge then disappearing behind it. The road is clear, potholed now and down to one lane after the deluge washed half of it away. Dad picks his way along it. Spare parts are hard to come by now so any damage to the car would be a disaster for him.

The landscape widens out in front of us. The wall creeps North away from the road, twisted lanes lead to farmhouses nestled in crags, steep fields run up and over the horizon. They should be full of sheep grazing, filling out for lambing but they stand largely empty. Only Nans flock is left here now and it shrinks every year. The car lurches left as we turn onto the dirt track up to Nixon's farm. Two rusting sheds, a double fronted farmhouse, a stone barn and a wide paved yard littered with hay and dung. Dad stops and turns off the engine. Turns to me.

Ready?

I'm not ready. I don't want to be here. But he keeps pulling me back, the thread taut and looped through every sinew. When he pulls it, I'm a puppet. My limbs jerk and my thoughts crumble and I'm nine years old watching him drown kittens in a trough. The passenger door opens. He grabs my wrist and pulls me from the car so hard I tumble out and hit the ground. I right myself, brush off the dust and follow him. The cows are penned into the furthest barn, dappled with light spilling through the cracked roof.

You said they were loose.

He shrugs his shoulders.

Must have brought themselves back into the shed.

Dad walks away towards the barn. His story is unfurling the way it always does.

What's going on here? Dad!

He stops and swivels slowly towards me. Folds his arms across his chest, runs his tongue over his teeth.

There isn't time for questions. I needed your help. So help.

He walks to the barn and picks up a large stone then brings it down hard on the padlocked door. Once, twice, and on the third attempt, it yields. I run to him.

We can't do this.

We can. We're doing it. There's a year old Polaris in here and I'll not see it go to waste.

Fucks sake Dad, we can't.

He grips both my shoulders and brings his face so close I can feel the tickle of his beard on my cheek. His breath is stale, hot. Spit coats my cheek as he talks.

They were ungrateful bastards. Always lording it over us with their old money and their fancy things. Never said thank you when we loaned them our tup after that fucking dog ripped the throat out of theirs. Got record prices for the lambs that year. And what did I get? Fuck all. I try to wriggle free but his grip tightens, fingernails clawing at my skin.

Didn't deserve half of what they had. And now they're gone. They made their choice. Done it to themselves. I'll take what I'm owed.

He releases me and I stumble backwards and fall again, this time into a dried muck pile. I lower myself onto my back and look at the sky. I always liked cloud watching, making shapes and stories, tracing out worlds with my fingertips. Now there is only endless blue. I know what we're doing is wrong. But his words were always the ones that mattered. His voice, his way. There is never any telling him. I stand slowly and follow him into the cool dark of the barn. He reaches for the light and three tarpaulin covered mounds swim into view. Dad rubs his hands together, pulls hard at the tarp closest to him and reveals a neat, forest green vehicle. No mud splatters on the bonnet, the canvas doors intact. A thin whistle escapes through his teeth.

It's like new. Barely been out of the yard.

He runs his hand over it, tip to tail like he's sizing up a bull from the mart. He pulls the next sheet and three swallows dart from the rafters and out into the sun. It reveals an old tractor, probably fifties, red paint flaking from the cab and tyres flat to the ground. Dad climbs into the driver's seat and feels around for anything left behind. I walk to the back corner of the barn, following a sliver of light coming through the slim side door. The third mound sits in shadows. It is low to the ground and the tarp looks clean, the front corner nearest the wall folded back. Footprints are pressed into the dry soil around it.

Might be something here Dad. Looks like it's just been covered over.

He jumps down from the tractor, walks to the opposite side of the mound and meets my gaze.

Shall we do it together? he says.

I nod and we take a corner each, rolling it back from the boot to the bonnet. It's a Volvo estate, sage green and low to the ground. The car I used to jump into the back of when the school bus broke down. Rust swirls around the wheel arches and bricks are stacked where the tyres should be. Dad leans in to look through the windscreen, then lurches backwards, hitting the wall and sending a cloud of dust into the air.

Dad? What is it.

Don't son, don't look.

I take a long breath and use my sleeve to clear a layer of grime from the passenger window. There are four bodies in the car, seat belts on, chins dropped to their chest. Mother and father in the front, hands knotted together. Two grown-up sons in the back. A pipe snakes its way from the driver's window to the exhaust, thick grey tape sealing the gap.

What is this Dad? Why?

He is kneeling on the floor now, head in his hands, his words muffled.

We all thought they'd done one, they didn't show at the mart so we came up and there was no sign.

When did you last see them?

Must be a fortnight ago. At least.

I perch on the edge of the bonnet, close my eyes and picture them during hay making, laughing, clattering round the field in the baler. Lick my lips and taste the ginger loaf that was always on the table. Quiet the ringing in my ears and hear the boys arguing over whose bullock would bring the highest price.

They lived for this place, I whisper.

Dad is standing next to me now. He touches my shoulder with his hand, so lightly I could have imagined it. Then he turns, and slowly, gently, covers the car back over. I help him cover the tractor and the draw the tarp back over the Polaris. I turn off the light and we walk out into the sun, pulling the doors shut behind us.

We should ring someone.

No signal up here son, not since they turned the mast off.

Right.

Doubt anyone would come anyway. Nothing to be done is there.

Dad turns his face away from me to the sun. I stand next to him, wait until he is ready then we leave. Heave ourselves into the car, an invisible weight dragging us into our seats. Drive out of the yard, a cloud of dust in our wake, then right, along the straight wall road with its rise and fall. The sky is still clear, the hot wind rolling in through the open window. No other vehicles crawling along the road, no click clack of walkers' poles or call of worried ewes. Dad turns down the steep hill into town and towards the river, the stepping stones exposed to their crumbling root. We pull up outside my house.

Will you come in Dad? I'll make us a pot of tea.

He turns off the engine and nods. Then rests his hand on my arm and squeezes until I feel the nip of his nails and know I'm not imagining it this time.