

Christmas Eve and Ugly Shoes was already there.

Anna frowned at the girl sitting near the heater. In the best seat in the waiting room.

Warm, and facing the window, it looked out over the river. The girl was deep in a book, glancing up briefly as Anna sat down opposite. On the wall behind Ugly Shoes posters of ferries failed to brighten the dreary room. Facts and figures, Tonnage, Draught, Displacement.

The words meant nothing to Anna, the ferry took her to work and brought her back home. Home.

The ghost of her mother in every room. She didn't remember her father leaving, only the silence he left behind.

The automatic door opened with a hiss and click, letting in an icy blast from the grey river.

Shiny Forehead shivered as she sat down next to Ugly Shoes and propped a bag decorated with holly between them. Ugly Shoes squealed with delight and in exchange passed her a small square box wrapped in red foil. They hugged and thanked each other.

Soon they were deep in some sort of saga regarding Christmas arrangements.

Their conversation ebbed and flowed, voices lowering to a whisper then rising to shrieks of laughter.

What did they have to talk about?

Every morning, and the same on the way back.

Anna didn't bother herself to listen to their chatter, the odd words that did reach her seemed frivolous and superficial.

They seemed flighty, vulnerable somehow. Everything she was not.

And the expressions they pulled. Crumpling frowns and eye-crinkling laughter, soon enough those lines would be permanent. Did they care?

She looked down at her boots. Elegant black mid-calf warm and waterproof. Ugly Shoes seemed to be wearing some sort of industrial clogs, bottle green with thick green tights.

And Shiny Forehead, pale skin, not a trace of cosmetics. What a difference a touch of powder would make. Had these girls any idea of the impression they made?

Anna thought back to her first lipstick. How hesitant she'd been. Not too much, not too thick.

Poncho Pink.

She wouldn't leave the house without it now. She'd never tried.

Hiss and click, the door slid open and Wax Jacket wheezed in. He rubbed his hands together. "Home time at last, eh ladies?"

The girls grinned in agreement, Anna peeled back the cuff of her glove, checking the time as the girls rose, the lights of the approaching ferry cutting through the gloom.

Anna fastened the studs on her gloves, smoothed the front of her coat and left the warmth of the waiting room.

A freezing wind hacked at the waves around the boat and a clatter of hail hurried them on board.

Anna settled herself in the big corner seat in the lounge.

She was comfortable on the ferry.

The red vinyl seats with their high button-backs, the faded curtains. The thick cracked paint on the handrails. Even the little teardrops of rust around the rivets at the windows.

Anna didn't see them as flaws.

All part of this place, the place that was not really anywhere. Not home and not away.

There were fewer than a dozen passengers on board, all regulars. Three of the men had started their celebrations early. Ties loosened happy at the bar.

Anna looked out at the leaden sky as the tannoy announced the safety instructions.

Under her feet the engines thrummed and the bottles in the gantry tinkled as the ferry moved off, churning the water to a dark foam against the green pilings.

Once clear, the engine note changed and they headed across the river.

Anna expected a rough crossing as the ferry dipped and reared on the angry waves.

Thirty minutes across, thirty minutes back, a very civilised amount of time Anna thought.

Long enough for a cup of tea but not so long that people felt obliged to engage in conversation.

She watched as Ugly Shoes made her way to her seat with two steaming mug, the rolling of the boat causing her to stop and brace herself against a pillar. She giggled as the coffee slopped over onto the floor. The steward with the white teeth steadied her, helping her to her seat.

Hands on hips he chatted to the girls. Anna could imagine the frothy nonsense he'd entertain them with.

As she watched, a memory shot to the surface, it was his broad shoulders and dark hair.

Daniel had shoulders like that.

Daniel.

Her thoughts drifted back to smiling sunny days, she heard the laughter, swayed to the music. She smelled the soap on Daniel's skin, tasted the tears of their last embrace. And then just as her mother had predicted, she had a silence all of her own.

A savage gust spattered hail against the window behind her as the ferry rolled on.

The steward passed on his way to the counter. He smiled at Anna. "Tea Miss?" Before she could answer, the boat lurched violently. The steward expertly kept his balance, deftly stepping aside as the coffee from toppled mugs washed over the edge of the table.

Hands flat on the seat each side of her, Anna turned to look at the worsening weather.

Pale grey streaked the dark sky and the wind slapped a hard rain against the glass.

The girls were quiet as they watched the bar staff stow the cups and tumblers safely under the counter.

Below in the engine room, pipes and gauges and valves strained against the storm. Crew activity increased, heavy boots clattered up and down the decks.

Anna gave a small gasp as the lights flickered. When they dimmed a second time the girls shrieked and moved to the bar.

Forty five minutes passed as the ferry pitched and rolled.

The tannoy announced that there may be trouble docking and he'd been informed that the storm had yet to peak, but no need to panic he added breezily.

Anna looked at the other passengers, no panic, in fact the relaxation grew with each glass.

After another twenty minutes, the engines stopped.

The wind seemed so much louder now and Anna had to strain to hear the next message. A reassuring voice announced they would sit out the worst of it in mid-channel and wait for clearance to berth when the wind eased.

Her fellow passengers struggled with the faint mobile signal, relaying the drama, rearranging social plans.

Anna was in no rush to get home but it irritated her that the heating would come on, heating an empty house.

She leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes, but Daniel was there, in her head. His soft smile tearing at her.

The memory was precious, but the remembering hurt.

She sat up and looked around the lounge. Most of the passengers were at the big table near the bar.

Shiny Forehead was flirting with a young man. Yes, flirting was the word, allowing him that close, no space between them, heads almost touching.

Another hour passed. Anna actually felt quite safe, the boat still rolled and heaved, the wind still tearing up and down the river, but they'd been fed and the lounge was warm.

She'd slipped off her coat and folded it neatly next to her, smoothing her gloves on top.

There were many more empty glasses at the big table now, the barman was technically off duty and he joined the party.

Ugly Shoes had a strand of tinsel around her neck and was encouraging others to join in singing Christmas carols.

Another hour.

Nestling into the angle of the seat, she considered slipping her boots off. Deciding against it she looked around the lounge.

Everyone was now at the big table.

Except Anna. She looked at the faces. They were happy. The two girls were watching her.

Then they were beside her, one on each side. Their cheeks were flushed and they looked at her expectantly.

Anna realised they had asked her a question. A glass sat on the table before her, the amber liquid rising and falling as the ferry swayed.

Shiny Forehead inched the glass forward as Ugly Shoes nodded. For medicinal purposes they said.

Anna looked at their bright smiles, it was Christmas and she was tired.

Still they chattered.

Shiny Forehead was a nurse, her eyes sparkled and her skin glowed. Wisps of fine blond hair fell across her cheek. She was going to work for a charity in India.

Ugly Shoes taugth the piano, her beautiful hands rested on the table, elegant fingers intertwined. Her boyfriend had the ring, ready for their Christmas day announcement.

Anna only half listened.

The ferry shuddered and dipped, Anna caught the glass before it toppled.

The girls swayed back to the big table, Anna wouldn't join them, thank you. She sat back holding the glass at arms length watching the light change as it curled smoothly round.

For long minutes she looked past the drink, to the table. She wanted the girls to ask her again. Because this time she would go. She wanted to sit there, to lean, smiling, into a shoulder next to her.

A clatter of rain rattled at the window, making her jump and she clutched the glass tightly.

Then pulling it towards her she looked down into it, cupping her hands around the smooth belly of the glass.

The liquid ebbed and flowed as the vessel rocked.

They weren't going to ask her again. She could see by the body language, and the way the conversation flowed, they'd forgotten her.

The chime of the tannoy silenced the babble in the lounge.

They had clearance to dock. Estimated time of arrival fifteen minutes. The table whooped in unison.

Anna watched as the others hugged and cheered. The ferry still rocked and they held onto each other in little dances of joy.

Ugly Shoes strained to hear the voice on her phone as the engines growled into life, blushing with pleasure blew a kiss into the slender phone.

The engines peaked and thundered the ferry forward.

Shiny Forehead nestled against a young man who watched her scribble her number.

The camaraderie extended to helping the crew tidy the lounge, the banter continuing as they cleared up.

Anna gulped the brandy.

The steward with the white teeth picked up the empty glass." A Merry Christmas, Miss" Anna's throat burned and her eyes were bright with unshed tears as she turned quickly to pick up her coat and gloves.

Through the rain-speckled window she saw the lights of cars waiting on the quay, some of them flashing headlights as they recognised figures waiting to disembark.

The passengers shuffled forward as the ropes were fastened to the capstans and the ferry inched alongside.

One by one they made their way down the gangway, helped by the crew, timing their progress to the heave and swell, the wind whipping their hair.

Anna was last. There was no-one waiting for her.

The steward with the white teeth held his hand out to her.

So like Daniel.

Anna's face was wet as she looked at the people on the quay.

Meeting.

Being met.

She was cold and she was tired.

Falling to her knees she grabbed the bottom rail. The steward reached to her but she was quick.

In a swift elegant movement, knees and ankles together she swung her legs over the side and slipped into the black chasm between the ferry and the wave-lashed timbers. The gap opened and closed with the sway, the water roiling and slapping against the pilings.

The steward and deckhands roared an alarm, staring helplessly into the dark waves.

On shore someone screamed.

It was Wax Jacket who asked the question.

The girls hesitated before they whispered to the windswept quay.

It was the lady with the pink lipstick.

Drifting down, Anna swayed in the freezing gloom, her coat billowing above her. The storm rocking her gently to and fro.

In the eerie, watery nowhere she heard the door of the waiting room open and close.

Over and over.

Hiss. Click.

Hiss. Click.

In a reflex action, she felt her limbs flail, struggling to surface.

Gentle hands stilled her arms. A soft voice calming her.

Hiss. Click.

Then the darkness was gone. Light and shadow drifted across her vision.

Faces and hands moved around her. Gentle hands and kindly faces.

It was entirely strange and entirely familiar to Anna.

Hiss. Click.

A voice to her left.

“Welcome back, Anna.”

A nurse busied herself with tubes and lines as she moved around the bed.

She told Anna what day it was, and what was happening.

“We’re going to let you breathe on your own now.”

Anna had so many questions but the airway made speech impossible, the tube that breathed for her for three days. Her chest rising and falling. The hiss and click of the ventilator.

Breathing on her own now, Anna was able to whisper her questions.

The staff answered her. Filling her in on the last few days. Of the heroic rescue that made the newspapers.

The nurse pointed to the cluster of cards by the bedside.

“You’re a lucky woman, Anna.”

It felt strange to hear herself described as lucky.

“Thank you nurse,” she began, then seeing the name tag, asked hesitantly, “can I call you Rachel?”

The nurse smiled. “Of course.” It was a smile that lit up her face.

Anna smiled too as she read the cards, every one of them.

So many names, so many people to thank. She determined to put a face to all of the names.

She would be a different Anna now.

She was alive.

The End.