

# andrea eberly

THE LAND BEHIND THE FOG

This is an excerpt.  
The full story can be read  
in Volume 30.2

SOUNDS MOVED STRANGELY OVER THE WINDSWEPT MOOR: bouncing off stones, sliding along tea-colored streams and twisting in the air. In the week Iain had been back on the island, everything felt somehow immaterial. Even now, as he hunched over the trench and drove a blade-shaped tool into the peat bank, he experienced a continuous surprise at the solidness of the things.

Below him, the rounded hump of his mother shifted as she lifted a peat block onto the bank. When she spoke, it seemed to come from far away.

“I’m hungry.” She said this in Gaelic, which was the only way she’d been addressing Iain since he’d arrived, even though she spoke perfect, melodious English.

“I’ll get the food,” Iain said. With the soft rolling r’s and a childlike prosody, some might not recognize his English as having a Scottish accent at all.

Maw didn’t look up and continued to move blocks onto the bank.

Iain dropped the peat-cutting tool and walked over to the car to grab a thermos of tea and two wax-paper-wrapped sandwiches. Water squished around his rubber boots. Tiny pink flowers uncurled on the heather — it was almost summer. The wind carried the scent of smoked dirt and green growing things. Maw laid out some garbage bags to keep their pants dry as they sat on the edge of the trench to eat.

Maybe every child feels this distance after a long absence, Iain thought, as he watched the mist swirl in patches as if some fay place hovered on the other side.

These days he lived in Rotterdam with his Dutch girlfriend. He hadn’t been back home for years, having followed a job to the sea and followed the sea to Holland. Marijke was eight months pregnant. Would that squirmy fish living inside his girlfriend’s belly one day find its home as small as Iain found his?

Peggy, Iain’s sister, had called him last month. Told him he had to help Maw cut this year’s peat because Peggy’s husband had thrown out his back and she was too busy with the kids. Iain offered to just send Maw some money for a load of black coal.

“She’ll try to do it on her own. She won’t spend your money,” Peggy had said. “She’s old, Iain.”



“Not a good time for a visit.”

Peggy just laughed.

The only sound was the wind stirring the plants and Maw’s gummy chewing. Maw’s peat bank was a couple miles from her house, not far from the road. As they ate, a blue hatchback slowed, and the passenger rolled down the window and took a picture of the two of them. Real-Life Crofters. Maw lifted her tea cup.

Thousands of years’ worth of Iain’s ancestors had cut peat on the Western Isles. Marijke’s father had worked in petroleum as a geologist and when he died, she’d kept all his old maps and atlases. She’d read all about the Western Isles and delighted in telling Iain facts about his homeland as he packed his suitcase.

Some time after the last ice age, the rain increased and the land could no longer drain the water. This non-draining water was acidic and prevented the dead vegetation — mostly sphagnum moss — from fully decomposing. Layers and layers of mummified plant material piled up, about a millimeter a year, and became a carbon-rich brown material. If allowed enough time, eons of time, it would eventually compress into coal.

A whole human lifetime measured only a few centimeters of peat.

Back at Maw’s stone house, Iain opened the stove and blew on the smothered ashes to bring the fire back to life. He added some more of last year’s peat. The cottage had concrete floors covered in vinyl. Exposed beams were painted the same color as the walls, except where the paint flaked off and revealed ghost-gray wood. When he was growing up, Iain never noticed how the odor of burned peat clung to the towels, the blankets, to everything.

The house phone rang — there was no cell reception on the property — and Maw told Iain to get it. In Gaelic, of course. She leaned back in her moss-green upholstered chair and clasped her hands, big knuckled fingers braiding together.

Marijke called every night at about 8 o’clock. Her English was near perfect except for few little things like saying touristic instead of touristy. In the time he’d been living and working as a diesel mechanic at a shipyard in Rotterdam, Iain could hold a conversation in Dutch.

“How are your legs?” Iain asked in Dutch to keep his mother from eavesdropping. “I miss them, you know,” he said, picturing Marijke’s long, cream-colored gams, his stubbly cheek against her velvet thighs, his hand on the curve of her calf.

She chuckled, “I miss my ankles. Been trying to keep my feet up more.” She paused then asked, “How’s the peat collection going? How’s your mother?”

Iain glanced at Maw. She stretched out each foot in a deliberate motion and her pant legs rode up just enough to reveal dusky, swollen legs. She’s grotesquely old, he thought, and immediately wished he hadn’t allowed such a cruel thing to unfurl in his mind. To Marijke he said, “Fine.”

“You know, Jan, I was looking at some of my father’s old maps. Did you know your islands are made up of rocks that are three billion years old?” Marijke’s Dutch pronunciation of Jan — Yann — was almost identical to how Maw pronounced Iain in Gaelic. “Three billion. Can you imagine?”

Iain didn’t know how to respond, a billion was just as inconceivable as a million. A red glow from the little window on the stove illuminated Maw’s face. Her skin was all wrinkles and light fuzz, totally matte except for her shiny eyes peering out from heavy eyelids. Iain’s stomach compressed. A billion was just as inconceivable as the age of his mother.

“Did you hear me?” His girlfriend’s voice cut through his thoughts.

“Heh-yah.” The sound Iain made was a quick suck of breath that sounded like saying yeah backwards.

“How much more peat do you think you need to cut?”

“If the weather stays okay, maybe four or five more days?” They’d been lucky with the weather. While not a single day had been warm enough to go without a thick sweater, it had barely rained. “Oh yeah — I meant to tell you, I ruined my new trainers. Forgot how wet the ground always is and drowned them while going to the coop to collect some eggs. Peat water turned them dingy brown. And the stench is the limit.”

“I’ll see if I can find the same ones online — probably on sale.” Marijke made a small grunt and said, “Oh, you should see this, it looks like Baby’s foot is going to kick through my stomach!” Marijke had decided against learning the sex of the baby. “Tell your mother hello from me and Baby, okay?”

Iain cradled the phone and cleared his throat. “Marijke and the baby say hello.”

Maw turned toward him and said, “Are you going to teach him our language? He can’t just know Dutch.” She always called the baby-to-be he. Iain had showed her a photo of Marijke, belly big and round under her t-shirt, and Maw had remarked on how high she carried. Definitely a boy.

He couldn't bring himself to tell her that he didn't see the point in his kid learning a dying tongue. Iain didn't even dream in Gaelic anymore.

He shrugged. "The baby will also have to learn English. Three languages might be a bit much for a little kid."

"Gaelic's a beautiful language," Maw said.

Early in his relationship with Marijke, in the exchange of hot whispers late at night and salty laughter under pulled-up covers, Iain had called her *mo chrìdh*. Over the years, as they mostly spoke Dutch at home, he'd switched to calling her *liefje*. But he did agree with his

mother, Gaelic was beautiful, and this made him terribly sad. He turned away so Maw wouldn't notice his eyes. He couldn't bring himself to tell her that he didn't see the point in his kid learning a dying tongue.

Iain didn't even dream in Gaelic anymore.

The next day after spending the afternoon cutting peat, Iain and his mother sat at the table and ate leftover lamb roast on toast with gravy. Iain hadn't worn gloves the first day, and the blisters on his palms flaked. He peeled the skin back while his mother slowly chewed her food.

"Ach, stop that. Go make yourself useful and get some water boiling for a cup of tea." Her eyes were like shiny glass beads piercing through a lump of clay. A drop of gravy hung from the corner of her mouth. Iain considered pointing it out, but he didn't want to embarrass her.

Iain returned with a pot of tea, two mugs, and a pack of wafer sandwiches filled with caramel he'd brought from Holland. When he set down the pack of wafers his mother said, "Can't you bring in the Hobnobs too? I like the oats in them."

"We're out of those—the Dutch biscuits are all we got." Iain pressed his lips together and rubbed the back of his neck. He was lying. His mother did the shopping, she had to know that too.

"We'll pop by the shop tomorrow on the way back from the peat bank." Maw clutched her tea mug in both hands.

"Heh-yah. I'm going out with Donny tonight. His brother's having a party." Iain stood up and walked toward the entry way to put on his shoes and jacket. "He'll be here in a few minutes to pick me up."

“You should marry before he’s born,” Maw said, like she hadn’t heard Iain. She picked up a wafer sandwich and sniffed it before putting it back inside the package.

Why wouldn’t she just eat one? A coiling serpent of anger caught around Iain’s throat. “The baby’s going to be here in a month, a little late now to worry about that, isn’t it?” From the moment he stepped off the ferry onto the lunar Hebridean landscape he’d waited for his mother to bring up his marital status.

“How will he get our name?”

“Maw, it’ll be fine.”

She coughed and spat into a tissue. “She’ll stop wanting to go Dutch when she sees how much a baby costs.” Maw said ‘go Dutch’ in English.

Did she mean it as a joke? Iain wasn’t even sure. “Maw, Marijke and me, we have a shared bank account. You don’t have to be married for that.” He felt like being a little boy explaining how he got grass stains on his new pants. He wasn’t a little boy. He picked at his blister.

“Son, I’m having a joke. You’re the one who told me about them doing maths at dinner to figure out who owes what.” She picked up her tea cup and a catlike smile spread across her wrinkled face. “I’ve always wondered, if you drop by for a cuppa, do they give you a receipt itemizing any sugar and milk you put in your tea?”

He grabbed a wafer and stuffed it in his mouth before pushing the package closer to his mother. “Maw, try one,” he commanded, a couple of crumbs shooting out. Heat crawled up his neck and face.

“How’d a son of mine get so serious?”

When he and all his siblings still lived at home, she’d always been up to mischief. Once Peggy was hassling Maw while she was baking. She could have only been five or six years old. Maw slapped her back with flour-covered hands and left two handprints that looked like wings. She told Peggy that a fairy had stolen her real daughter and that Peggy was a changeling. Peggy got real mad and howled that she wasn’t a changeling. She wasn’t! He’d forgotten how funny his mother could be and an ache opened in his chest.

There was a knock at the door and Iain jumped to answer it. “That’ll be Donny,” he said. Donny walked into the entryway with his hat off and said hello to Iain’s mother.

Maw offered him a cup of tea and a wafer sandwich. “They’re really good,” she said.

Iain shot her a look. Maw had a seraphic expression on her face.

“They’ll be waiting for us,” Iain said and touched Donny’s arm, holding him back from approaching the table, the tea, the Dutch sweets. From Maw.

Maw creaked to standing and walked to her green easy-chair. “Have a good night then. Donny, say hello to your maw for me, you hear?” She fiddled with the radio knob until she found BBC Alba. She turned to the peat fire and closed her eyes.

Iain cracked open another beer. The lads had all raised a toast when they found out he was about to have a kid. Donny put on a football highlights DVD with the volume turned down. The five men sat on the sofa and a couple easy chairs.

“Remember Judy?” Donny asked.

“Wasn’t she one of the Garlics?” said a man wearing white sneakers and blue windbreaker — Jamie, another of their schoolmates. Speaking Gaelic at primary school branded one a ‘Garlic.’

“Ha, so was Iain.” Donny said.

“Careful who you’re calling a Garlic.” Iain stretched out his fingers and closed them into a tight fist. His mouth twisted into a smile. A small white line, just under his bottom lip, stood out. Back in school, during year 9, Donny and Iain had really got into it, though Iain couldn’t remember why anymore. Donny had pummeled him. The scar was from where his incisor cut all the way through. Now Iain was half a head taller than Donny and hard from years spent maintaining pumps, boilers and engines on commercial ships.

Donny raised his hands in mock defeat and said, “But now Iain’s just a cheese-eating, clog-wearing chav.”

“Fuck off, Donny. At least I never dated a cousin,” Iain said and punched Donny in the arm. The other men laughed. It seemed like half the island shared only four or five surnames.

“Touché.” Donny clasped him on the shoulder. “No, but about Judy. We’ve been seeing each other, and she’s just told me she’s pregnant. We’re going to get married.”

“At least she’s got a different last name, she’s not a Morrison.” Iain lifted his bottle. Iain’s mother’s maiden name had also been Morrison, meaning Iain and Donny were probably related somehow wayback.

“You could just say congratulations, you arsehole.”

“Meal do naidheachd!” Iain said.