

## *Fleece*

I caught sight of her almost at once, making her way across the concourse in the direction of the ticket booths. She was wearing her grey Rifford Island fleece, the one with the oversized hood. She had the hood up. I wondered if she were using it as some sort of disguise. As I watched, she tipped her head backwards to stare up at the digital display screen that tabled departures. The hood began to slip, and she quickly raised her right hand to keep it in place. The skin of her fingers looked normal, unblemished and white, as it invariably did, from a distance.

I came out from behind the barrier and went down the steps into the luggage hall. A deluge of faces engulfed me and I lost track of her for a moment, then spotted her again in a queue before one of the kiosks. The back of her fleece looked flattened and creased, as if it had been slept in. I stood and waited, staring at the embroidered pattern of Rifford Island Harlequins on the garment's rear panel. The stitching was a luminous, jellyfish pink, the pile a blobby, acrylic travesty of sheep's wool. I remembered her picking it out from amongst two dozen others on one of the circular metal racks that form a summer infestation on the quayside at Orton Minor. The shop had been called Morwenna's, and I had watched her as she paid the girl behind the counter, eight shiny new coins adding up to exactly the right money. The fleece had been put in a bag. It had occurred to me that the word 'fleece' had an archaic feel to it, that it might have fallen from use completely, had it not been for the invention of such garments. Prior to that it had been voiced only by Tasmanian stockmen and aged

connoisseurs of the Classics. I had stood in the sun with my eyes on her fingers, listening to the heavy, muted throbbing of the craft in the harbour and thinking of Jason and his crew of plundering Argonauts, and of a film that I had seen once, Pasolini's *Medea*. The crystalline shimmer and clank of blue beads, a bone-dry island enslaved to cannibalism and human sacrifice. I had also remembered that to fleece could also mean to rob, that to be fleeced meant being divested of everything for which you had previously striven. On our way home, she had taken the fleece out of its bag and put it on. I asked her if she were cold, but she said no; she had just wanted to find out how it felt.

When she turned away from the ticket-windows I was standing directly behind her. For a moment she flushed, then her cheeks became perfectly white. I reached out for her, catching hold of her wrists and then forcing both her hands into mine. Her fingers seemed boneless and slick, as if they were wet. I stroked her softly-scabbed palm with the pad of my thumb. We stood there in front of the ticket booths, blocking the thoroughfare. An elderly man with a briefcase clutched tightly against his chest barged into the back of her, pressing her into my arms.

"Let's go," I said. "We need to get out of the way." I led her away from the kiosks towards the doors. Seeing where I was headed, she pulled back from me and I was forced to take her into the buffet. "Can I get you something to eat?" I said, knowing she would say no. She hated white bread sandwiches and instant coffee, anything processed, anything not raw.

"I only have half an hour," she said. Her head was lowered, and the hood of the fleece had fallen down over her shoulders, revealing the chaotic matted tendrils of her hair. They were a dull blue-black, with a hint of sullen violet, the colour of squid-ink.

I saw a live squid once, in the new marine aquarium at Old Gravesend. It was a ten-foot monster, and missing one of its arms.

“Nobody need know,” I said. “Why don’t you stay?” I knew I didn’t mean what I said, but I felt the need to say it, all the same. I thought of her the way she had been a fortnight ago, standing in the bathroom, naked, dabbing at herself with a towel. When I saw the greenish patch of skin at the top of her thigh I had run my fingers tentatively across it, thinking I might have bruised her. I had found flesh that was heated and swollen, puckered with blisters. Each blister had a hard edge, like a scale.

“It hasn’t worked,” she said. “I was warned that it might not.” She had begun to cry then. When I asked her if anything hurt she had said no, then shaken her head. This time she said nothing at all.

We sat together in silence, with our knees touching under the empty table. From the pallor of her skin I had expected her to be cold, but the flesh beneath her jeans exuded a warmth that seemed almost feverish. When the half hour came to an end we made off into the crowd. The vaulted ceiling of the luggage hall seemed to magnify each sound, an untiring commotion, beating with harsh insistence upon my ears. My eyes, unable to look at her, fixated themselves upon extraneous detail: the roseate, thick-lipped mouth of a vagrant as it bore down on the rim of a hamburger, a one-armed girl in a short-sleeved dress of vivid scarlet, a trio of blue-rinsed ladies making sundry purchases from a newspaper stand. ‘Two infants slain,’ proclaimed the headline of the tabloid spreadeagled to the front of the kiosk. ‘Police speculate monster at large.’

I accompanied her as far as the guard-rail. I couldn’t get onto the platform without a card. I held onto her hand for another second, gazing up at the monitor screens where the names of cities spelled themselves out in a miasma of orange light. Their

assonances and sibilances jumbled themselves together inside my head, murmuring incomprehensibly, as if in a foreign tongue. Sunlight poured down without mercy through the leaded glass dome of the roof. As she moved away from me and onto the platform a shaft of it caught her hair and set it momentarily on fire. It hung down about her face, shimmering and radiant, unique. There seemed to me something of horror in it, and something of fortune too. Like the pelt of a golden ram perhaps, or some other yet more mythical beast.