

He came to her in the new year, not fully formed, but as a creature gifted in parts. Here, a forelock, there, a fetlock. On the tideline a strand of tail, a flared nostril, a perfect hoof so smooth and solid she could hear it stomp. Sometimes when Kip had lost his ball he would scavenge on the beach for wood, pull from the kelp a clean canon. Because she had only seen the horse as a scattered puzzle of driftwood pieces, she was surprised by the way he would rear up in her imagination, whole, at unexpected moments. Once, a long time ago she had seen a driftwood horse. He was magnificent, a beast of bleached limbs, a stallion whose muscles rippled silver-white in sunlight. He had stayed in Lynn's mind like a fairy-tale steed or a stallion from Arthurian legend.

But this week, when Lynn took Kip on the beach, she had done something unusual. When she saw a piece of driftwood which was exactly the right shape for an alert ear, she had carefully placed it in the breast pocket of her jacket. She forgot about it until the next day, when she was searching for Kip's lead, she felt the shape of it.

'Well now, this is your left ear,' she found herself saying before placing it carefully on the kitchen windowsill. Kip looked up from his bed, cocked his head, went back to sleep.

By the following week the windowsill was full of dry driftwood. Sand had accumulated there too, twinkling in the late morning sunlight. Who was there to care? For nearly two years she had been on her own with only the dog for company. The house was too big she knew that, but she couldn't face selling. The village was a kindly, solid presence. Neighbours she had known for thirty years, a shop, a tiny library and a tea shop. And the sea in all its moods. On still days she could hear the lapping tide as steady as breath even in the highest part of her garden.

Lynn studied the jumble of driftwood on the sill. For a moment it seemed to cohere, become sinuous as if it were alive...

Had the ear twitched?

Lynn was aware she was holding her breath. Had she finally run mad with grief? Her heart was beating with a kind of inexplicable excitement. There was a soft woof from Kip as the letterbox rattled and the moment was over. But she felt somehow different.

*'An epiphany,'* thought Lynn.

A plan was forming.

Before she could change her mind, she was looking up the number of the village primary school, found herself asking to make an appointment to see the head teacher, Beth McGowan. She had known Gina, the secretary for years. She was inquisitive, liked to gossip.

*'And what is the meeting for?'* enquired Gina.

Lynn hesitated, reluctant to voice her idea.

*'Well, it's a craft project... to do with the sea.'*

*'Right-oh,'* said Gina as if unconvinced that quiet Lynn, from the end of the village with the bonnie collie, who had been widowed for two years, would have anything original to offer.

*'I'll fit you in with Beth tomorrow at ten then,'* said Gina.

The following day Lynn found herself waiting in Beth's office. She studied the walls which were covered in children's work. Above Beth's office chair was an infant's painting of a monster. At the bottom were words written in an adult hand.

*'My monster is friendly. He likes people.'*

*'There are so many different types of monster,'* thought Lynn.

Suddenly the door swung open and Beth appeared, smiling. The room was filled with a kind of infectious warmth.

*'Mrs Kerr? You have a project for me.'*

*Lynn hesitated, now feeling embarrassed by her bold idea.*

*'Driftwood. A driftwood horse sculpture, actually.'*

*Beth was frowning.*

*Lynn began to fumble for her plastic 'visitor pass', prepared to apologise for wasting her time...*

*'Brilliant! Just the thing for Primary Seven's spring term. Outdoor education, animal anatomy, problem solving, measuring, creative writing, community liaison – that's you Mrs Kerr. Oh, and we'll need pipe cleaners for model making. When do we begin?'*

*By the time Lynn left the school a plan was in place. A driftwood appeal would go out to the parents and to the wider village. Lynn had suggested the wood could easily be left in the driveway at the side of her house. She was near the shore path, making it easy for people to drop it off. Lynn would keep an eye on the wood, sort out anything which wouldn't be suitable.*

*The wood arrived quickly after the appeal went out. Villagers came every day, some with one piece, others with armfuls. Susie Fyfe, who had just moved into the street, rang her doorbell with three small children in tow.*

*'Sorry to bother you Mrs Kerr but the children wanted to give you the wood themselves'*

*'Oh, that's wonderful...it's Susie, isn't it?'*

*The baby was leaning forward in her pushchair, feeding Kip bright orange crisps.*

*'Come on in,' said Lynn. 'I've just boiled the kettle.'*

*Before February was out a large pile of driftwood had grown in the driveway. There was too much really but Lynn thought this would be interesting for the children. What would they see she wondered?*

*At school the following week Lynn found herself in front of the P7 class for the first time. She had been nervous. The class were shushed by Beth. They looked at her expectantly. When Lynn began to speak, she realised that after a lifetime teaching you don't forget how to talk to children. Lynn showed the class pictures of driftwood horses. They were curious, began to ask questions. Except for one dark-haired boy who was gazing out the window, they all appeared to be interested. At the end of the session Lynn asked the class, who could remember the Latin name for the horse. There were frowns. Lynn was amused to see a little girl scratch her head. Then the window gazer spoke up.*

*'Equus caballus.'*

*'Well done, Harley!' said Beth. Lynn grinned. The dreamer was bright. After, as Lynn made their way to the front door Beth leaned towards her.*

*'Harley is an LAC,' said Beth.*

*'A Looked After Child,' said Lynn, remembering the term from her days working at the local secondary school.*

*'Mum died in an accident five years ago. Harley lives with his granny. Harley has potential but I worry about him. He's going about with the McTear twins. They're older than him. It's not a great combination but he's at that age.*

*Lynn nodded. She knew about ages. She was at a strange age herself.*

*Harley was thinking about Mrs Kerr and the driftwood horses. The first day she had visited he had been prepared to be bored. Had wondered about doing his notorious owl hoot. But then he had liked the pictures of the driftwood horses, especially the one which was galloping with its mane and tail streaming in the*

wind. He liked the way it knew where it was going. He wanted to stay at home that evening. He was thinking about sketching some horses. Gran said she was making shortbread. Her baking was terrible, but her shortbread was not bad and he liked the way it made the house smell nice.

Then the doorbell went. Three times. Insistent. His heart sank.

The McTear twins.

'You coming out?' asked Kevin McTear.

He thought about refusing but what was his excuse? He would be the joke of the class. Baking with granny? The twins' little sister was in Primary Six. She had already mastered the art of false lashes and lipliner. She was vicious.

'Bring matches,' said Kyle McTear.

'Matches?'

'Yeah, numpty. Nick them off your smoky granny.'

It had been a dry February. The daffodils were early this year. On the steep bank above Lynn's garden, they jostled for attention. Willy Greg of 'Greg's Logs' had volunteered to take the wood up to the school in his pick-up. He was coming the next day.

The children were choosing the kind of horse they wanted to make. They had been experimenting with colourful pipe cleaners. A herd of gorgeous, wonky horses, in bizarre colours, had greeted Lynn on the display table at the main entrance earlier in the day.

'We need to be flexible,' said Lynn. 'I think the horse will choose itself, from the wood. It will decide how it wants to be, as if it is rising from the sea.'

Lynn smiled at the children's puzzled expressions. Harley was looking thoughtful.

*'Like Pegasus,' said Harley. There were titters from the class. Harley scowled. It was always a mistake to look too clever.*

*'Yes,' said Lynn, 'You're right Harley, like a mythical horse but without wings. Our horse will have his hooves on the ground.'*

*Kip gave a loud snore, creating a welcome distraction. He had been allowed to accompany Lynn. Beth had fixed it.*

*'It's a miracle. No dog allergies or phobias in this class. No parental objections. I swear the class are calmer when Kip is here.'*

*Beth asked the children to gather round.*

*'So, what are we going to call our horse?*

*'Coasty MacCoast Face,' shouted Harley. The class found this hilarious. Clowning was acceptable. Harley had restored his reputation.*

*'How about Coast?'* said Lynn.

*'Coast it is,'* said Beth.

*Kip stood up and shook himself.*

*'We'll start tomorrow.'*

*That evening the McTear twins were grinning. They looked purposeful. Harley sensed trouble. They were a dangerous current to which Harley had been attracted. Now he was unsure he wanted to hang around with them, but he was caught. He had done some stupid things with them. They had too much on him now.*

*'Let's go down the end of the village,'* said Kyle.'

*The end of the village. What was there? Of course, the wood pile in Mrs Kerr's drive and Harley had the matches.*

*'Go on then, mate. You light the pile, and we'll watch from across the road.'*

*Harley wanted to refuse. He felt sick and yet there was a kind of thrill about it all. Harley couldn't refuse. There would be consequences. The name calling would start again.*

*Before he could think about it the matches were out. Harley hesitated. Could he stall for time, say the matches were damp? Harley was fumbling with a match. And then Kevin McTear was beside him. He had a plastic lighter.*

*'Get out the way, loser!'*

*Kevin flicked the lighter; pushed his arm deep into the wood pile.*

*At first nothing. Then, a thin plume of smoke rose from the bottom of the pile, visible in the streetlight. There was a crackle as a branch caught. A flurry of sparks; a kind of sigh like the letting go of breath. Harley felt his heart begin to race.*

*'Run for it!' shouted Kevin.*

*Harley heard the twins' laughter become more distant and then a low rumble like the thunder of hooves. The fire was rising. Harley watched the flames grow great tongues which licked further and further up the gable end. They would soon be as high as the bedroom window...*

*Suddenly Harley was running towards Lynn's front door. He rang the bell furiously. Would she hear it? The storm door was open. The inside door had a loose latch. Nobody bothered much with tightly locked doors in this village. Now, he was in the hallway, yelling.*

*'Mrs Kerr! Wake up! Your house is on fire!'*

*Kip was in the kitchen but now he was barking loudly.*

*He heard Lynn stirring. Heard her footsteps on the stairs.*

*He bolted.*

The next day it was all round the village. The driftwood pile had gone up like a bonfire in Lynn's driveway, but she and the dog were fine. The gable end of the house was blackened but there was no major damage. 'Kids messing about' was the rumour.

'Yes,' thought Lynn. I know which kid.' She had recognised his voice. But when the young police officer had asked her if she had any idea who had woken her up, she surprised herself by saying, 'No, none at all.'

Lynn had thought that would be the end of the project, but the village was indignant. Galvanised. The wood gathering would start again. Willy Greg would collect the wood every day and lock it up at his yard.

Beth came to see her.

'Don't worry Lynn, this won't stop us. I've had parents messaging the school all day. Everyone is on the case. Any idea who raised the alarm?

'Not the faintest,' said Lynn rather too firmly.

Beth raised an eyebrow, but Lynn was changing the subject swiftly.

'I'll drop in to see the class on Friday. I've still got the wood on the windowsill, at least.

Beth moved to the windowsill, surveyed the collection. Suddenly she picked up a gnarled piece. Held it up. What had she found?

A dark and beautiful eye stared back at Lynn.

She hadn't seen it herself until now. Coast had been watching over the house all this time.

He was still alive.



By mid-April the wood collection was huge. Lynn was answering the doorbell every day to find neighbours, children, workers and strangers passing her wood. They were concerned about the fire risk, didn't want to leave it in the garden. There were so many conversations. Over the Easter holidays people had travelled. There was driftwood from Anstruther, Findhorn, Penzance, Scunthorpe and Scarborough. Someone had smuggled a piece home in their suitcase from Alicante. A man arrived one day with wood he had found on the shores of Loch Ness. He was concerned it wasn't from the sea. Would it compromise the project?

'Any wood which has drifted,' said Lynn, smiling, 'Thank you.'

Someone had brought wood day after day but never rang the doorbell. The finds were always interesting and always laid neatly in the porch.

Harley.

At school Harley avoided Lynn. But he was quietly busy, measuring, researching, studying the tome procured from library services on horse anatomy.

'Goodness,' said Beth, 'Harley has really taken to this project. I've never seen him so busy.'

'Yes,' thought Lynn, *atonement*.' But she was pleased all the same. Pleased that she had protected him.

Lynn had to go away for the next two weeks. She had promised to visit her sister in Perth and other friends in Edinburgh. When she returned there was a palpable sense of contained excitement in the P7 class.

'The children have something to show you, Mrs Kerr. Close your eyes.'

Lynn felt herself being gently pushed and steered by children through the school and out into the sunshine.

'Open your eyes, Mrs Kerr. The children were all silent now. Lynn opened her eyes. There, before her was her horse. He was huge, magnificent. Breaking into a canter.

*She could see his muscles ripple in the light. The arch of his neck was perfectly curved, like a Greek marble.*

*'There is just one thing missing,' said Beth winking at the children.*

*Ellie White stepped forwards, presented Lynn with the piece that was the left eye.*

*'What an honour,' said Lynn, unbearably moved.*

*'It was actually Harley's idea, Lynn,' whispered Beth. 'He wanted you to be the one who finished the horse.'*

*At the school gala in mid-May, Coast had been exhibited to the public for the first time. The children took turns in pairs to answer questions from the visitors. There was publicity, cameras, journalists; even a journalist from Alicante who had read about the holiday maker who had brought back the wood in his suitcase. She wanted to know which piece of the horse was from Spain. Unprompted, Lynn heard Willy Greg's son saying, 'We don't give out that information to journalists.'*

*'Add 'Press Relations' to your list of skills,' whispered Lynn to Beth who was dressed as a rhino for the teachers and parents' egg and spoon race. It had been decided that Coast would remain on display at the school and that a new bee-friendly garden was to be designed around him.*

*'That's the new Primary Seven project for next year,' said Beth.*

*Later in the afternoon, on the way back home from the gala, Lynn felt strangely sad. It had been a good day and yet it felt that something had ended. Dark clouds were gathering. A storm had been forecast to begin later that evening.*

*'Ah well, just the two of us again, Kip,' said Lynn, 'Let's get home before the wind starts up. 'We'll put the fire on to cheer ourselves up.'*

Harley was one of the last to leave the gala. He had helped Mrs McGowan move Coast to the grass in front of the school where he would stay until the new garden had been made. On his way home Harley felt strangely sad. It had been a good day and yet something had ended. Soon he would be moving up to the secondary school. He felt as if he was adrift.

Harley found his Gran in her red slippers taking sheets off the line, her grey hair streaming. The sheets billowed and snapped like sails. Suddenly the wash basket birlled across the grass. Harley laughed and chased after it. He helped Gran unpeg the last sheet.

'Holy Moses Harley, this wind is blowin' a hoolie. That's the rain on. Get in the hoose quick.'

Harley followed Gran but as they went in the back door there was a savage gust. The back door slammed and the photograph of Harley's mum on her motorbike fell from the kitchen shelf. The glass shattered. As Harley stooped to pick up the picture his mother gazed back at him. With the glass removed he felt she could see him more clearly now... as if she could see the tangled things in his heart.

Later that evening the doorbell went. The McTear twins. Gran looked at Harley's face, looked for defiance, found dismay. She stood up and went to the front door.

'I'm afraid Harley's no comin' oot. He's got jobs he has tae finish.'

She was not going to argue. The boys tightened their hoods, turned to go.

'Just tell him he's missing out on the horseplay,' said Kyle.

Harley was upstairs lying low. A few minutes later, Gran shouted him down for tea and biscuits.

'Just as well you didnae go wi these boys – they said you'd be missin oot on the horseplay.'

*Missing out on what?*

*Of course, they would go for Coast. He was in front of the school, in full view of the security cameras but everyone knew they hadn't been working for months. He should have known.*

*Harley grabbed his jacket.*

*He ran to the school but Coast was gone.*

*'Bastards,' muttered Harley.*

*Where now? Think like a McTear twin. Fire? No, too wet now. The old trick; let's just move the horse to another part of the village, put him in someone's front garden, a wee joke. Too tame. Where else?*

*With a sickening lurch, Harley realised where they had taken him.*

*When Harley arrived at the old pier the McTear twins were at the far end where huge waves were crashing against the timbers. He could hear them shouting, working in tandem. Harley could see a dark shape beside them. Then, a brilliant flash of lightning illuminated Coast. He was beautiful, fearless, rearing on his hind legs, his great hooves furiously fighting the darkness.*

*Blinded by driving rain, Harley raced towards the end of the pier but in the next flash of lightning Harley saw the McTear twins drenched by a huge wave, clutching each other, like a grotesque two headed monster.*

*'You're too late Harley, you've missed the horseplay,' yelled Kevin.*

*Harley felt the timbers of the pier groan and shiver, saw Coast's great head rise and fall in the roiling water.*

*Before Harley jumped, he had the satisfaction of seeing a look of utter disbelief on the faces of the twins.*

*The shock of the water was paralysing.*

Harley was drowning and drowning and the peace of it was gentle and the letting go of grief and guilt and fear seemed perfect. But just as Harley was giving up his mother was there beside him on her motorbike, the one on which she had died, saying 'Fight Harley. Fight for me.' He was climbing up behind her. He could feel the smooth leather of her black jacket, cool on his cheek as he held her waist, caught the familiar scent of her hair..

There was a powerful roaring noise like an accelerating engine in his ears as Harley surfaced, gasping for air. Behind him the pier was collapsing. Ahead of him, still buoyant was Coast. Harley struck out, caught his mane, his withers, clung on. The current was taking them both far from the pier. Harley wrapped his fingers into the Coast's strong back, held tight as he bucked the waves. Now Coast was moving parallel to the shore: Harley could see the curve of the bay, the village lights.

Lynn was in the garden room. It had been a while since she had used it. Alasdair had built it for her. It had been difficult to sit there without his easy presence. The cushions on his armchair still held the shape of him, his smell. His slippers were kicked under the seat where he'd left them. There was still a misshapen log at the bottom of the basket which they had laughed about. Lynn had lit the wood burner and the room became bright and cosy. She listened to the rain drumming on the corrugated iron roof. Watched the drama of the garden lit up by lightning. Kip was lying on the rug and then he suddenly sat up.

The tide had turned and the wind had blown Harley and the horse in a different direction. Home towards the village. He had washed up on the beach with Coast by his side. He had never let him go. With a huge effort, he managed to manoeuvre Coast safely above the tide line. Checked his legs. Patted his muzzle. Pulled a long strand of brown weed from his tail. He knew where he had to go now.

When Lynn saw a dark figure press against the glass door of the garden room she froze in fear. Who on earth was in her garden at this time of night? But after one sharp bark Kip's tail began to wag furiously. She opened the door.

It was Harley. Dripping wet, hair plastered to his head, carrying his jacket.

She pulled him in, quickly closed the door. He was shivering uncontrollably but his eyes were shining. He looked skinny in his soaking white school shirt but somehow taller.

*'A baptism of sorts,'* thought Lynn.

*'I've saved the horse, Mrs Kerr.'* His gaze was frank and even. *'I've saved Coast! The McTear twins threw him off the old pier but I went in after him. I put him back on the path to the village.'*

Lynn could see it all. Felt sick at the risk he had taken and relief he was safe now.

*'You can stay here tonight, Harley. It's still wild out there. I'll phone your gran now and tell her you're safe. I think I've got some dry things you can borrow.'*

In the morning Lynn was pleased to see Harley wolf down a late breakfast, a heaped plate of eggs and toast. Gina had been in touch. Lynn told Harley that the twins had survived the collapse of the pier. They had been caught hitchhiking on the A9. They thought they would be blamed for Harley's death. They were still in trouble anyway. Kyle had been caught on camera in the local shop buying the lighter that was found in the charred remains of the woodpile. Willy Greg had taken Coast to his yard.

Lynn gave Harley a lift back home. They had just turned left into Harley's street when they saw a boy limping. It was Kyle McTear. Harley gave him a mock royal wave on the way past. Kyle looked as if he had seen a ghost then quickly made a rude gesture in return. They drew up at Harley's house.

*'I'm going to make another horse in my back garden,' said Harley. 'A winged horse. Mrs McGowan is letting me have the left-over driftwood.'*

*Harley had got out the car, was about to close the door.*

*'I might need some help,' he added.*

*Lynn nodded. Smiled.*

*'I'll get the pipe cleaners in,' said Lynn. 'When shall we start?'*