MISSING IN THE SNOW

A Shetland Short Story

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Snow doesn't come often in Shetland. Not a real snow, which blocks roads and stays long enough for the bairns to build snowmen and sledge down the banks. We're a long way north – on the same line of latitude as parts of Greenland and Alaska – but we're surrounded by a warming sea. Here in the islands, we're never far from the water.

The snow arrived the week before Christmas. It started when I was in Lerwick hoping to catch up on last-minute shopping. I was walking down Commercial Street, avoiding icy patches, nodding to the folk that I knew, though everyone was half-hidden by waterproofs and boots and the inevitable Shetland knitwear, so sometimes it was hard to tell them apart. Then, suddenly, there was snow. Not the sleety rain that stings like gravel, but real, white flakes blown by a ferocious northerly wind. We were all adults there, but we stood, silent, watching in wonder.

By the time I got to Sumburgh to meet the plane, the gritters were out. The wind wasn't quite so wild in the south of the Shetland mainland, and the snow floated across the runway in a more civilized way. All the same, I watched the plane bucking and jumping as it came into land, and I was glad I wasn't in it. I've lived in Shetland for more than ten years and I still don't enjoy the small planes. Give me the ferry any time.

It was only two thirty but already the light was beginning to fade. The days are short here in mid-winter. I watched Perez walk across the tarmac towards arrivals. Only a silhouette, but I'd have known him anywhere. Yet he looked different somehow. Happier. Without the weight of the world on his shoulders. Domestic life must be suiting him. He was married and was living in Orkney with our boss Willow and their little boy. Shetland was still his patch too, and if there was anything unusual, he'd come here to take over.

'Jimmy!' He might be my boss, but he felt like a friend. I'd come to the islands as a rookie detective, and he'd taught me everything I knew. Now I had two children of my own and was more confident and settled than I'd ever been. That was almost entirely down to him.

'Tosh!' He still had the tentative grin and dark hair.

We walked through the snow towards my car, and I drove him north up the road past sliding cars and a snow plough, until we got to Lerwick. He'd kept his house at the Lodeberrie, with its feet in the water, as a base for Cassie, his stepdaughter. Somewhere for her to stay when she came back home. It had been a stressful drive and I'd had to concentrate, so we'd not discussed the case in any detail on the drive north.

'Come in!' Perez said. 'And you can tell me all about this strange case.'

'It could be something and nothing. Maybe I shouldn't have dragged you up here, especially in weather like this.'

'I don't feel dragged, and you wouldn't have asked me to come if you'd thought it was nothing.'

The house was already warm – he must leave the heating on low to keep out the damp that would seep through the walls. The fire in the wood burner was laid. Perez threw in a match and switched on the kettle, and I started to explain.

'There's a writer, a soothmoother, who lives out on the west side, towards Whiteness. He's disappeared.'

'What's his name?'

'Nicholas Manners. He writes thrillers. Three days ago, he was working in the library here in Lerwick, he chatted to Karen the librarian, and then, suddenly, he was gone. The staff thought he'd headed home, though usually he stays all day and just goes out for lunch. He doesn't drive and always uses the bus. We've chatted to the drivers – they all know him as a regular passenger and he's very distinctive. Tall and thin with a shaved head. Karen described it as a head that looks like a skull. The skin very tight. No flesh at all.' I looked across to Perez. 'She's not the sort to be given to fancies, but she seems quite thrown by his disappearance.'

'Karen was the person who reported him as missing?'

'No, that was his neighbour in Nesbister. Jennifer Tait. She'd invited him in for drinks two days ago. When he didn't turn up she phoned him, and when there was no answer, she went to check. The house was unlocked.' Again, I looked across at Perez. In Shetland, few people bothered to lock their doors if they were just popping out, so there was little significance to this. Except that Manners was a soothmoother and for incomers old habits like locking doors die hard.

'You went to check?' Perez said.

'Sandy went first, and then I looked in. Manners is quite a celebrity and Radio Shetland had already picked up that he wasn't at home, so I took it more seriously than I might otherwise have done. In the meantime, I checked with NorthLink and Loganair. The man could have been called away south. Some family emergency, which put all thought of neighbourly drinks out of his head.'

'Anything?'

I paused for a moment. 'No booking in his name. Of course, he could have used an alias, on the boat at least. They don't check ID these days. But why would he?' I hesitated a for a moment. 'There were a few odd things in the house.'

'Go on.'

It seemed like old times, sitting there in the light of the fire, drinking tea and talking through the case. I realized how much I missed having Perez in Shetland, the daily contact. Being in charge of my own patch felt rather lonely.

‘His phone was on the table. If Manners planned to be away for a while, I think he’d have taken it with him. The house was tidy, with breakfast things washed up but left to drain by the sink. That would suggest he went missing the day he was working in the library.’

‘But not *from* the library, surely,’ Jimmy said. ‘Because he’d have had the phone with him in Lerwick.’

‘Apparently not,’ I said. ‘When he was working, he left his phone at home to avoid disturbance, so he could have disappeared from the library or from Nesbister. But, as I said, we checked with the bus drivers and taxi firms; nobody took him home.’

We sat for a moment in silence. We were both thinking through the implication of this when the lights went out. A power cut. Not unusual in the islands in bad weather, but quite rare in town. Perez switched his phone to the torch setting. There were candles on the dining table at one end of the room, and he lit them. It occurred to me that he might have invited Willow for dinner during their strange sudden courtship, that they could have had a romantic candlelit meal before leaving for Orkney.

‘We haven’t found the laptop,’ I said. ‘He was using it in the library. Karen confirms that. And it’s not in his house.’

‘Which would suggest that he’s taken it with him. Or that it was with him when something happened to prevent him coming back to Nesbister.’ Perez looked at me over his mug of coffee. ‘You’d best get home to Euan and your bairns. Even walking, it’s not good weather to be out. I’ll see you back.’

‘It’s less than half a mile away!’ But I’m a city girl, used to streetlights and traffic noise and I don’t like silent dark nights. I didn’t protest too hard.

‘I need the air,’ he said. ‘And to feel Shetland under my feet again.’

The wind had dropped a little, but still the snow was falling, eddying round street corners, whipped into drifts. A couple of drunks staggered out of Da Lounge, laughing like kids when they realized how deep it was. I let myself into our house and stood on the doorstep to wave goodbye to Jimmy Perez.

The next day, it was freezing and clear. No wind. Ice causing sagging electricity wires, making them heavy enough to snap the poles, or pull them from the ground like trees uprooted. School and nursery closed, but my man works from home, and he does most of the childcare. My car has winter tyres, so I picked Perez up from the Lodeberrie and we followed the snow plough out to Nesbister, passing vehicles abandoned in ditches and slewed across roads on our way.

The house in Nesbister was just off the Whiteness road – one street of former council houses so close to the shore that the gardens led onto a shingly beach. Beyond that grander houses, new builds, some Scandinavian kit homes. I’d expected Manners to live somewhere

smarter, but this had one of the best views in all the islands, and I could see why he'd chosen to stay here.

I was surprised when Jennifer greeted Jimmy with a hug – he's not really the hugging sort – but they were of a similar age, and I supposed they would have gone to the Anderson High School together. However, it seemed that the connection was even deeper than that. Jennifer had lived in Fair Isle until the death of her husband, and for several minutes they sat, sharing memories of the place and the people there. I felt that Perez was uneasy throughout the conversation, that for some reason he didn't like the woman.

It seemed that Jennifer earned her living from knitting. She made contemporary garments using old Fair Isle patterns and Shetland lace. Her living room was a kind of show room. This was where she brought the visitors who wanted to commission her unique clothes. There were ancient chairs made of driftwood and straw, pieces of her knitting, a faded map of Fair Isle with every hill and geo named. A spinning wheel stood in one corner. As Jimmy had seemed so uneasy in her presence, I'd expected that we'd go straight to Nicholas Manners' house, but instead we sat in Jennifer's museum of a room, watching the starlings feed on the scraps she'd thrown out for them on top of the snow, while Jimmy asked questions.

'What sort of man is he?' Perez asked. 'Do you know him well?'

Jennifer took a moment to answer.

'He's pleasant enough. A good neighbour. Thoughtful. I don't think he'll stay. The house is a winter let and I believe he'll go south in the spring. He's just here for research. That was what he said. Apparently, his ancestors come from Fair Isle.' She looked at Jimmy. 'Had you heard the name?'

Jimmy shook his head.

'He was full of questions about the people and the place. He'd heard of Willie and seemed to take a morbid interest in his death. I told him Willie had drowned at sea. That surely should have been enough for him. Why would he want to know all the details?' Jennifer looked across at me. 'Willie was my husband. He was out fishing for piltock when he was washed overboard. A cruel accident whatever folk might say.'

That made me full of questions, but I said nothing. Jimmy could fill me in when I spoke to him later.

'Anything else you can tell us about him?' Perez asked.

Jennifer thought again. 'He's a little arrogant, maybe. It seems he's rather a celebrity in England and his books sell very well there. But here, folk haven't read him so much. I think he works in the library rather than at home because the staff there have heard of him. He enjoys the recognition.'

'When was the last time you saw him?'

'Wednesday morning heading up for the bus stop.'

‘Did he have anything with him?’

‘Only his laptop bag on his back as usual.’ Jennifer knew what the question was about. ‘No suitcase or rucksack. Nothing to suggest that he was planning some time away.’

‘Would you have seen him if he came home that day?’

‘I might not have seen him, but I’d have heard him. He’d put on music as soon as he came in. Not very loud, but enough for me to hear.’

‘That must have been irritating,’ Perez said.

She smiled. ‘Not really. He plays classical music. It’s rather restful. Not like some of the stuff I’ve had to put up with when Edna let the house to a couple of youngsters from the fishery college.’

‘Does he usually lock his door?’

‘If he goes into town. Not for just a walk into Whiteness to the shop.’

Jimmy nodded and then he did stand up. We climbed the steep steps to the road, holding on to the handrail because the path was so slippery, and then we went to the house next door.

Manners’ house was warm. He must have left the central heating on, a sensible precaution in this weather perhaps, even if he was away south to see friends and family for Christmas, but with the extortionate price of oil, I’d have turned it down low. This was blasting away as if he’d just gone out for a moment.

It was just as it had been the last time I’d looked. A classic cheapish rental property, basically furnished. He’d brought few of his own possessions. Perez prowled through the rooms, looking, it seemed, for something specific. Whatever was in his mind, he didn’t find it. I knew better than to interrupt him when he was in this mood.

‘We need to find the laptop,’ he said. ‘That’s the key to it all. Even if his work has been deleted, we should be able to rescue most of it from the hard drive.’ He paused for a beat. ‘You’re better than me at social media, Tosh. Could you ask your Facebook pals to put the word out? Maybe offer a reward if it’s found?’

‘Sure.’ I couldn’t see how the laptop could be so vital to our inquiries, but I got into my phone and started to spread the word.

Driving back to Lerwick in the car, I asked Perez about Jennifer Tait and the story of her husband.

‘Willie Tait was my cousin,’ he said. ‘We were as close as brothers.’

‘And was it a fishing accident?’

‘That was what the police decided on the basis of the other man’s evidence. There were two of them out together. I wasn’t there. It was before I moved back to the islands. I was

working in Aberdeen. Jamie Grieve, the pathologist, could only tell us that Willie had drowned, not how he got into the water.'

'But?' I could tell that there was more to the tale.

'Jennifer was having an affair with the other man in the boat. One of the workers at the bird observatory. She'd grown up in Lerwick. Life on the isle must have seemed rather boring to her. It wasn't what she was used to. You could see why she'd be tempted to have a bit of a fling.' He paused, gave a little smile. 'Willie was a splendid man, but not the most exciting.'

We drove on in silence for a while. Ahead of me, a truck was struggling to get up Wormadale hill. Its wheels were spinning on the ice, and I needed to concentrate.

'What do you think happened?'

My eyes were still on the road, but I could sense him shrug. 'There were rumours. It seemed strange that Willie, who'd been in a boat since he was a toddler, had drowned while the Englishman had survived.'

'Is that why Jennifer moved away from Fair Isle? Because of the rumours?'

'Perhaps. But as I said, she was bored. Willie's death gave her an excuse. She wouldn't have wanted to manage the croft on her own. Though she's very happy to make a show of her Fair Isle connections when she's selling her knitwear.'

'What happened to the Englishman?'

'They lived together in Nesbister for a while, and then he drifted away south. Perhaps she was too controlling. Or he'd seen her for who she really was.' He turned towards me. 'Shame is a terrible thing.'

'Do you think the story is relevant to Manners' disappearance?'

'I don't know. It could be a coincidence. It seems odd though if the writer was digging around into what happened all those years ago. It might make the basis for a fine story and people all seem fascinated by true crime these days.'

I thought that was all it was: a coincidence. 'Surely she wouldn't have mentioned Manners' interest in her husband's death if she'd killed him.' The idea of Jennifer as a murderer seemed ludicrous. 'That *is* what you're saying?'

Perez didn't answer directly. 'She's a clever woman. Let's see what research Nicholas Manners was doing in the library. She might have decided to tell us he was interested in the Fair Isle drowning before we found out for ourselves.'

I said nothing. My mind was working in a rather different direction triggered too by something Jennifer Tait had said. I hadn't liked the woman either, but she didn't fit my idea of a killer.

In the library, Karen showed us the history of Nicholas Manners' research. He'd asked to see archive material and copies of *The Shetland Times* from fifteen years earlier, the time of Willie Tait's death. Perez had been right. If Jennifer had known all about Manners' work, she'd only have been telling us what we could find out for ourselves. I hated to admit it, but Jimmy Perez usually *was* right.

I worked from home that afternoon. The power was back on in town, but there was more snow forecast and all inessential staff were told to leave Lerwick. I sat at my desk in our little house, the baby in her pram next to me, watching Euan and our son build a snowman in the garden. News of the missing laptop had gone viral – someone had even posted it on TikTok – and it had been linked to the writer's disappearance.

While I was waiting for the computer to be found, I tried to track down the Englishman who'd been Jennifer Tait's lover. After all, he'd have as much to lose if the story of Willie's drowning became the central theme of Manners' huge new blockbuster as she would. He was called Robert Peters, and he'd moved on to work with a conservation charity in Aberdeenshire. I spent most of the afternoon on my phone, calling in favours with colleagues in Aberdeen. It seemed that Peters had finished work for the holidays. A colleague had said that he was planning to spend Christmas with his in-laws, but nobody knew exactly where that was.

I moved on in a different direction, not expecting any sort of result. Euan and our lad came in from the cold. I made them both hot chocolate and we lit a fire. The baby woke, wanting to be fed. It was approaching the bairns' bath and bedtime when my phone rang. It was the colleague in Aberdeen who had been doing my legwork. With a result. I decided there was no immediate rush and only set off for the Lodeberrie once the children were asleep and Euan was sitting in front of the fire with a large whisky.

I'd phoned Jimmy and he was expecting me. I hadn't passed on my news though. I wanted to tell him that in person. He poured me a glass of wine and I asked about Willow and his boy. I'm not usually one for deferred gratification, but I wanted to take my time over this.

'I've found him!' I said at last.

'Who? Robert Peters? Jennifer Tait's former lover?'

'No! The author. Nicholas Matthews. He's staying in a hotel in Aberdeen.'

'So there never was any mystery.' Jimmy cupped his wine glass between his hands. 'The man just went south for Christmas.'

'Oh, there was a mystery! But it was all of his own making. Jennifer Tait told us that he wasn't as well known in Scotland as he was in the south, but I've been checking, and his more recent books haven't been selling brilliantly there either. I wondered why he was staying in a winter let in a former council house instead of somewhere a bit smarter and closer to town. I've been chatting to his agent and there's talk that the contract with his publisher might not be renewed.'

‘So, he decided to go missing,’ Perez said. ‘Like Agatha Christie. There was talk at the time that her disappearance was a stunt.’

I’ve never been a fan of Agatha and didn’t know what he was talking about.

‘I don’t think Christie was the model! It was something a bit closer to home. Do you remember the author who came to stay with her friend last Christmas and lost her laptop in the snow? I know her mate Ingirid, who just happens to live in Nesbister too, and she told me all about it. The writer just put out the word in Shetland for folk to look out for it, and the thing went crazy. It got picked up by other journalists and became an item on BBC News, and then CNN and Sky wanted to interview her. She was totally embarrassed, but her publicist was delighted! You could see how a failing author might want a bit of that for himself.’

I’d already worked out how Manners had staged the disappearance and explained my theory. ‘Instead of saying goodbye to the library staff as usual, he waited until there was nobody about and just left. He’d have put on a hat to hide the shaved head, and everybody looks the same wrapped up against the cold. He could have had overnight stuff tucked into the bottom of his laptop bag. Then, he walked to the ferry terminal where he bought a ticket in a false name. It was an early sailing that day, so he’d have been able to board at three thirty. There’d be no hanging about for people to recognize him. The next day, he booked into a hotel in Aberdeen and waited for people to notice that he was missing.’

‘So, the whole disappearance was a publicity stunt. And I was being misled by a drowning that happened fifteen years ago.’ Perez grinned and raised his glass to me. ‘Congratulations Tosh!’

I raised my glass back at him. I had tracked down Robert Peters too. But that was another story, for another time.