Odis' sea

a modern odyssey

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For Ettie,

the Penny in the real world.
Because behind every journey stands someone
who makes ‘home’ more than just a place.

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Prologue

The last question Penny asked him before he left was the simplest of all.

‘When will you be back?’

Penny stood with one shoulder against the edge of the cabin, as though she refused to be solemn even at a farewell. She was a little shorter than Odis and wore her dark hair loose, although whenever she was working or annoyed she tied it up with the hairband round her wrist. Her face was narrow; beside her left eyebrow was a small pale line that only showed when the light fell from the side. She wore a green raincoat and worn trainers, and looked at people a fraction longer when she suspected they were trying to reassure her.

Odis stood on the pontoon with one foot aboard and one on land. In his right hand he held the stern line. It was still early. Behind Penny, the windows of the houses along the harbour were dark, apart from one kitchen where someone was already making coffee. Gulls walked across the roof of the fish auction hall as though the morning had begun especially for them.

‘Three weeks,’ he said.

Penny looked at the bag he had put in the cockpit, at the two extra jerrycans of diesel, at the liferaft he had checked again the evening before, and then back at him.

‘That wasn’t what I asked.’

‘Twenty-two days, if you want to be precise.’

‘I asked when you’ll be back.’

Odis laughed. ‘On the twenty-second.’

‘That’s a date.’

‘That’s usually how we agree when someone will be somewhere.’

Penny held out her hand. Odis gave her the mooring line. She held it while he stepped aboard. For a few seconds they were joined by nothing more than a blue line, looped round a cleat on the boat at one end and running through Penny’s hand at the other.

‘So you know you’ll be back on the twenty-second?’ she asked.

‘No.’

‘Good. We’re getting somewhere.’

‘I expect to be.’

‘That’s different.’

He wanted to say that once again she was making an ordinary conversation complicated, but saw from her face that this was not the moment. He bent down, made the engine ready and glanced

at the little flag at the stern. Hardly any wind. Good for setting off, less good for later.

Penny eased the line.

‘Will you call?’

‘Every day.’

‘You know that already too?’

This time he did laugh. ‘Bye, Pen.’

‘Bye, Odis.’

The line fell onto the deck.

He reversed out of the berth, turned the bow towards the harbour entrance and raised his hand. Penny stayed there until he could no longer see whether she was still waving back.

Three weeks later he was not home.

The coast disappears



1 — The coast disappears

The first few hours went exactly as Odis had plotted them.

He liked days like that. The engine ran quietly, the VHF crackled only when a traffic station called a ship, and a thin band of cloud hung above the coast, dissolving as the sun rose higher. On the chart table his route lay in a neat pencil line towards the south-west. Not the shortest way, but the most sensible: along the coast first, then across if the weather remained settled. He had prepared the passage during the winter, evening after evening, while Penny sat opposite him reading, or pretending to read, and occasionally asked why a man going sailing for pleasure needed so many spreadsheets.

‘Because preparation makes it more enjoyable,’ he had said.

‘That sounds like something only you could say with a straight face.’

He had made tables for fuel, water, provisions and distances. He knew the engine’s range at different revs. He had noted the tides, marked alternative harbours and worked out three weather scenarios. His phone held copies of the papers that also lay aboard in a waterproof folder. Even Penny had had to admit that little had been left to chance.

Early in the afternoon he switched off the engine and hoisted the mainsail. The silence that followed was greater than he expected. At first he heard only the flapping of the canvas as he hauled in the sheet. Then the water along the hull. Then, as though his ears had only just remembered they could hear more than a diesel engine, other sounds joined them: the tapping of a block, a mug in the galley sliding against a bulkhead with every wave, the wind finding a thin note somewhere high in the rigging.

He steered with two fingers.

The coast was still visible, but quickly losing its detail. Houses became a pale fringe. Church towers and cranes held out a little longer. Then they too were no more than projections from a dark line.

Odis looked back and realised he was trying to place Penny’s house, although he knew it was impossible. Even the town was scarcely a town any more. What from the pontoon had consisted of streets, windows, people, bicycles, shops and a kitchen with a broken light above the worktop was a line from here.

He took out his phone and took a photograph.

He wrote to Penny: The world soon gets simpler if you go far enough away from it.

He pressed send.

No tick appeared.

He held the phone up, as though half a metre of height might make the difference, then put it

away.

By evening the land had disappeared.

Odis knew that, of course. He had seen the distance. He had his position on the screen. From the curvature of the earth he could even calculate roughly when an object of a given height would sink below the horizon. None of it was surprising.

Yet before eating he went outside once more.

There was no land anywhere.

That did something the chart had not done.

On the chart the coast still lay behind him. A solid, certain shape. He had only to run his finger back along the line to find it. Outside there was water, sky and a horizon that looked much the same in every direction.

He thought of Penny's question.

When will you be back?

He had answered with a date because a date was a place in time. But now, looking at an unmarked horizon, he suddenly understood why she had not been satisfied. A date was not a homecoming, any more than a position on a chart was a coast.

He shook his head at his own solemnity. One day at sea and he was already starting to think like a bad poet.

He made pasta.

2 — A message from yesterday

Penny's reply arrived the next morning.

Lovely photo. The world here is still annoyingly complicated. The plumber's coming between eight and twelve. Possibly.

Odis smiled. Beneath her message it said it had been sent at 22.17.

He looked at his phone. 07.43.

For nine and a half hours the message had existed somewhere without reaching him.

He typed: Good morning. Everything going to plan. 48°—

He stopped.

Coordinates were never any use to Penny. He knew that. She would reply that a person could just as easily say 'west of Brittany'. He deleted the figures.

Everything going to plan. Quiet night. Further south-west today.

Sent.

This time a tick appeared at once.

He made coffee and listened to the weather forecast. It had changed a little. Not much. A depression that yesterday's chart had shown passing to the north seemed to be slipping further south. The wind would strengthen later in the day and turn more westerly.

Odis laid two weather charts side by side.

On one, the centre of the low was here. On the other, there.

The strange thing was not that meteorologists could be wrong. Everyone knew that. The strange thing was that both charts looked as though they were pointing to something that existed: a neat circle of lines, arrows, numbers, colours. As though the atmosphere itself bore those contours and someone had merely traced them.

He looked outside.

The sea bore no lines.

There was a moderate wind. Clouds were coming from the west. The barometer had fallen a little.

Those were the things that were there, he thought.

But even that was too quick. The barometer was a needle above a graduated scale. The clouds were what he could see from this one spot. The wind instrument gave a number that depended on the movement of his own boat. Even 'from the west' assumed that he knew where west was.

He put the coffee down.

'Don't,' he said aloud.

No one answered.

He knew this tendency. Penny called it his ability to turn a loose door handle into a discussion about the nature of causality. Just sail, she had said. Not everything has to become a problem.

So he sailed.

Around midday the wind increased faster than forecast. Odis reefed the mainsail. An hour later he reefed again. The waves grew shorter and steeper. He decided to alter his planned course slightly for a more comfortable passage.

On the screen the line to his next waypoint shifted to starboard.

It was a small decision. No drama. Yet a few minutes later he looked at the old track behind him and saw that for the first time his journey no longer coincided with the journey he had designed at home.

There were now two routes.

The route on paper and the route in the water.

The first would never be sailed.

He could still see it. He could describe it. He could even calculate where he would have been at this moment if he had followed it.

But he was not there.

The difference seemed trivial until he tried to say precisely what the difference was.

One route had been possible.

The other was happening.

He thought of the countless lines he had drawn at home and rubbed out again. Some had been absurd, others sensible, some safer than the route he was sailing now. None had ever had salt water beneath a keel.

Was a possibility something?

He laughed at the question.

Then a wave struck the bow and flung half a bucket of water across the deck.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘At least you’re real.’

3 — The harbour that wasn’t there

On the fourth day Odis made his first real mistake.

Later he would identify several causes. Tiredness. A forecast that changed faster than he had expected. Too much faith in the electronic chart. The wish to be in before dark. But at the time none of those things felt like a cause. They felt like separate facts.

The wind had veered further that morning and was now almost dead ahead. The boat pitched. Odis had slept badly. With every wave a different sound woke him and he had to decide whether it was normal. Towards midday he decided to abandon his original destination and make for a smaller harbour he had marked as an alternative.

On the screen it was simple.

A gap in the coast. An approach line. A harbour basin. Depths in different shades of blue.

He calculated his arrival: a little after seven.

At half past six he saw the coast.

At quarter to seven he saw the lighthouse.

At seven he saw that something was wrong.

The harbour entrance was not where he expected it to be.

He looked at the screen. Then at the coast. Then at the screen again.

According to the chart he should be almost directly off the approach.

Before him lay a dark, rocky coast against which the surf broke white.

Odis felt a physical jolt of fear that outran his thoughts. He turned away at once, started the engine and furled part of the genoa.

Only when he had put more distance between himself and the shore did he begin to search.

GPS position: made sense. Compass: made sense. Lighthouse: correct light characteristic. Distance: roughly right.

So where was the harbour?

He zoomed in.

A small symbol appeared that he had not seen before. He tapped it.

Works in progress.

He swore.

The harbour had been badly damaged two years earlier. The old western entrance was closed; the temporary access lay further east and could only be used in certain conditions. He had downloaded a chart update, but the layer showing local notices was switched off.

It was the sort of mistake you joked about ashore.

At sea it was a different kind of mistake.

Odis kept well offshore and sailed parallel to the coast as darkness fell. The wind was still increasing. The nearest safe harbour was hours away.

He thought of the moment at home when he had circled the little harbour as an alternative. At that moment he had not circled a harbour. He had circled a mark on paper that stood for a harbour.

The distinction was childishly simple.

And yet he had just nearly steered himself into a rocky coast because of it.

That evening he did not eat.

He switched on the autopilot, pulled his coat closer and stayed outside.

Penny called at 21.12.

The call dropped out twice before they could hear each other.

‘You sound odd.’

‘Tired.’

‘Where are you?’

Odis looked at the screen.

He gave her his position.

‘No,’ Penny said. ‘Where are you?’

‘At sea.’

‘Thank you. That narrowed it down.’

He told her about the harbour.

There was silence at the other end.

‘Pen?’

‘I’m here.’

‘It wasn’t dangerous. I saw it in time.’

‘You just said you nearly sailed towards an entrance that didn’t exist.’

‘The entrance did exist. Just not any more.’

‘That is an extraordinarily Odis answer.’

He wanted to defend himself and found he did not have the heart for it.

‘I should have looked more carefully.’

‘Yes.’

He waited for something softer. It did not come.

‘Are you angry?’

‘I’m trying to work out whether I should be frightened.’

That sentence struck him harder than her anger would have done.

‘No.’

‘Do you know that?’

He looked at the waves, visible in the dark only when their crests caught the glow of the navigation instruments.

‘No,’ he said.

‘Good.’

‘There’s nothing good about it.’

‘No. But it’s a better answer.’

They talked for another ten minutes. About the wind. About his fuel. About the next harbour. Penny wrote down its name. Odis heard a drawer open, paper, a pen.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Writing down what you’re saying.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you’re there and I’m here.’

‘I knew that.’

‘So did I. Until today.’

4 — Two Odises

After the call Penny put a notebook on the kitchen table.

On the first page she wrote the date, the time of the call, the name of the harbour Odis was now trying to reach and the wind direction he had mentioned. Then she looked at what she had written and felt ridiculous.

As though a notebook could make a person safer.

She closed it.

Ten minutes later she opened it again.

Odis had said he needed about four hours. She wrote: expected arrival 01.30.

Beneath it: will call on arrival.

At one she went to bed with her phone beside her pillow.

At half past one there was no message.

Nor at two.

She called.

No connection.

At quarter past two she tried again.

At three she stood in the kitchen and looked up the harbour online. The website was in a language she barely understood. She found a webcam that showed a new image every few seconds. Rain. A row of masts. A quay. No way of knowing which boat was Odis's, even if he was there.

His message arrived at 03.17.

In. All fine. Call tomorrow. Exhausted.

Penny sat down on a chair.

She was relieved and furious at once.

She typed three replies and deleted all three.

In the end she wrote: Sleep.

The next morning she looked in the notebook again.

The strange thing was that there had been two Odises.

There was the Odis who had actually been at sea, wet, tired, occupied with sails, engine, waves and a harbour entrance.

And there was the Odis on her kitchen table: a sequence of times, words and expectations.

The second Odis had not moved for hours.

At 01.30 it still said: expected arrival.

At 02.00 too.

At 03.00 as well.

Meanwhile the real Odis had been somewhere else. Perhaps ten miles offshore. Perhaps outside the harbour. Perhaps struggling with a jammed line. Perhaps asleep on the seabed. The notebook made no distinction.

Until new information came.

Penny made coffee.

She thought of all the times Odis had said at home that a model was not reality. He usually said it in the tone of someone sharing a fundamental insight that every reasonable person already possessed.

Now she found it an irritating truth.

Because a model could be wrong and still be all you had.

At the foot of the page she wrote:

What do I actually know?

Beneath that:

That he called at 21.12.

That he said he was going to the harbour.

That a message came from his phone at 03.17.

She stared at the last sentence.

From his phone.

Not even necessarily from him.

‘Stop it,’ she told herself.

She drew a line beneath the three entries and closed the notebook.

Odis called at ten.

‘Good morning.’

‘Is that you?’ Penny asked.

‘Who are you expecting?’

‘That’s more complicated than you think.’

5 — The first long night

On the first night when Odis truly understood that there was no one nearby, nothing happened. That was precisely the problem. No storm, no breakdown, no strange light. Only a moderate wind, a black sea and the small sounds of Aurora he had never heard at home.

A line tapped against the mast. Somewhere behind a panel something vibrated with the engine. The cabin woodwork creaked as the boat slid over a long swell. Odis knew all those sounds separately, but together they sounded like a house with someone moving about inside.

At quarter to one he made tea. He put two spoonfuls of sugar in the mug, although at home he never took sugar. The sweetness gave him a childlike comfort. He ate a dry biscuit and thought of the kitchen at home, of Penny sweeping crumbs off the table with the side of her hand and then letting them fall to the floor because she was too lazy to walk to the bin.

He wanted to call her. Not because something was happening. Precisely because nothing was.

He had scarcely any signal. He wrote a message: Awake. All quiet. Deleted it. Wrote: Miss you. Deleted that too. In the end he sent a photograph of his tea with the words: Haute cuisine.

The message stayed undelivered.

Odis put the phone face down. It did not change the silence, but it changed him. He noticed how

quickly a person could treat a device as though it were a door with someone standing behind it.

Towards three he talked aloud. First to Aurora. ‘You’re pulling to port.’ Then to a shackle that would not open. Then, without a break, to Penny. ‘You’d think this was ridiculous.’ He heard his own voice and felt ashamed, although no one could hear him.

Perhaps that was the strangest thing about being alone: even without an audience, an audience remained inside him.

That night he slept in twenty-minute stretches. Whenever the timer woke him, for the first second he did not know where he was. Then came the smell of diesel and wet rope, the rolling of the boat, the red light above the chart table. Sea. Alone.

At sunrise he was exhausted and elated at once. The horizon turned pink. A pod of dolphins appeared unannounced alongside Aurora. Odis laughed aloud when the first shot through the bow wave.

‘Good morning,’ he said.

One animal rolled onto its side. A black eye, a fraction of a second.

Odis knew the animal was probably not greeting him. He greeted it back all the same.

When Penny called at eight, he told her about the dolphins. Not about the hours before them.

‘You sound tired,’ she said.

‘Slept badly.’

‘Were you frightened?’

Odis looked at the calm morning sea. ‘No.’

The answer came too quickly.

Penny let a brief silence fall. ‘Okay.’

He wanted to put it right, but did not know how. After the call her voice lingered in the cabin for a few minutes. Then that too was gone.

6 — The man who needed no chart

The old fisherman was broad across the shoulders and bent in the back, as though decades of walking into the wind had done both things to him at once. His face was brown and furrowed, with small pale eyes beneath eyebrows that grew in every direction. He wore blue work trousers with one knee mended in red thread, rubber boots and a woollen cap he did not take off indoors. When he thought, he rubbed the wooden table as though answers might lie somewhere in the grain.

The harbour was called Port Keravel and consisted of two stone piers, a row of low houses and a

café that was already open for fishermen at seven in the morning.

Odis stayed two days.

The wind outside the harbour rose well beyond what he found comfortable. He spent the first day sleeping, drying wet things and convincing himself that waiting was sensible. On the second day waiting began to look like cowardice.

Every morning the same old man sat at the same table in the café. He wore a blue jumper worn thin at the elbows and drank coffee from a glass. Odis had greeted him on the first morning. On the second the man pointed to Odis's phone, which had a weather chart open on it.

'Tomorrow?' Odis asked in halting French.

The man did not look at the phone. He looked through the window at the sky.

'Non.'

'Après-demain?'

The man shrugged.

Odis slid the phone towards him and pointed to the forecast. The wind would ease. Lower waves. Good visibility.

The man looked at the screen as though Odis were showing him a photograph of a relative he did not know.

Then he tapped the window.

Above the harbour low scraps of cloud streamed inland. Gulls stood on the quay wall with their heads into the wind.

The man said something Odis did not understand. A woman behind the bar translated.

'He says the sea will still be angry tomorrow.'

'The forecast says less wind.'

The woman shrugged. 'He doesn't say wind. He says sea.'

Odis looked at the old man.

'How does he know that?'

The woman asked him.

The man gave a long answer. She began to laugh.

'What does he say?'

'That he doesn't know.'

‘But he just said—’

‘He says he can see it.’

That irritated Odis more than was reasonable.

Seeing was not an explanation.

He pointed to his screen again. ‘This comes from buoys, satellites, models—’

The woman raised her hands. ‘I’m only translating.’

The old man drank his coffee.

Odis did not leave the following morning.

Not because he believed the old man, he told himself, but because the latest forecast had indeed become less favourable.

Towards midday he stood on the western pier.

Beyond the shelter, long swells and short wind waves crossed one another. It looked unpleasant.

The old man came and stood beside him.

For a while neither said anything.

Then he pointed to three places: the clouds above a headland, the foam along the outer pier and a group of birds flying low over the water. He used words Odis did not know.

Odis understood what he was doing all the same.

The man had no secret access to the sea. Over many years he had learnt which visible things often occurred alongside other things that were not yet visible.

He too had a model.

It simply was not on a screen.

Odis wanted to tell him that, and realised in time how ridiculous it would sound.

The man pointed to Odis’s boat.

‘Maison?’ he asked.

Odis thought he was asking where he lived and named his town.

The man shook his head and pointed to the boat again.

‘Maison.’

‘Ah. Non. Bateau.’

The old man smiled.

He pointed first to the boat, then to the sea, then to Odis.

‘Maintenant, maison.’

Home now.

Odis looked at the boat.

It was a small cabin with damp clothes, a gas stove, charts, tools, two half-empty water tanks and a bed that smelt of salt and lack of sleep.

‘Temporaire,’ Odis said.

The man shrugged.

As though every home were temporary.

7 — Three routes

On the third morning Odis laid three routes on the table.

The wind had eased. The sea would grow calmer during the day. He could resume his original plan, take a shorter coastal route or cross directly to a larger harbour on the other side.

He drew the possibilities on the paper chart because the screen suddenly seemed too easy. In pencil, each choice looked more final.

The old man sat over his coffee.

Odis showed him the three lines.

‘Laquelle?’

Which one?

The man looked at them. Then, without asking permission, he took Odis’s pencil.

He put a small cross on the first route.

Odis nodded. ‘Dangereux?’

The man added a question mark.

Beside the second line he put two question marks.

Beside the third, nothing.

‘So three?’ Odis asked.

The man slid the chart back.

‘Vous.’

You.

‘I know that.’

The man smiled in a way that made it clear he thought otherwise.

Odis chose the third route.

Not because it was safe. None of the routes was safe in the sense he had given that word at home. He chose it because the wind was favourable, because there were two alternative harbours along the way and because after two days of waiting he wanted to move on.

At 09.20 he sailed between the piers.

The old man was not on the quay.

Odis was unexpectedly disappointed by that.

Outside the harbour he set sail, brought the boat onto her course and looked at the two other lines on the chart.

They were still there.

Route one. Route two.

He could follow them with his finger.

In an hour they would still be on the chart. Tomorrow too. Perhaps still in a year, if he kept the chart.

But with every mile he sailed now, their meaning changed.

This morning they had been options.

By tonight they would be things that had not happened.

That distinction was nowhere in the pencil.

He took out his phone.

He wrote to Penny: I have three journeys today.

He looked at the sentence and added:

One I’m sailing and two that disappear as I sail.

The reply came twenty minutes later.

You’ve been away four days and you’re unbearable already.

Beneath it:

But I understand what you mean.

Odis put the phone away.

Before him lay an open sea that showed no sign at all that he had just lost two futures.

8 — The light

That night the light appeared.

At eleven Odis had switched on the autopilot and was sitting halfway in the companionway with a mug of soup between his hands. The sky was clear. Behind him hung a slender moon. Ahead there was nothing but black water and stars.

Then he saw a white light to port.

Not bright. Not close. A dot.

He checked AIS.

No ship.

He looked again.

The light was still there.

Odis picked up the binoculars. The movement of the boat made the dot jump through his field of vision. Sometimes it seemed higher, sometimes lower. No red or green navigation light. No recognisable pattern.

He checked the chart.

No lighthouse.

An oil platform? Too far beyond the known area. A fishing boat without AIS? Possible. A star low on the horizon? Also possible.

He noted the bearing.

Ten minutes later, again.

The light had shifted.

That all but ruled out a fixed lighthouse.

Or he himself had changed course.

He checked the compass.

Course almost unchanged.

Another ten minutes.

Another different bearing.

The light was coming closer or moving across him.

Odis put the soup down.

What a moment earlier had been a curiosity became a problem.

He called on the VHF. First a general call, then on a channel fishermen in the region often used.

No answer.

The light disappeared.

Odis kept watching.

Nothing.

He felt relief and immediately found it illogical. An unknown light that disappeared was not necessarily safer than an unknown light that remained visible.

After three minutes it appeared again.

Now distinctly further ahead.

He altered course by twenty degrees.

The light changed too.

Odis waited.

There was the problem in its purest form, though he would only call it that later. He saw something change. But why? Was the light moving? Was he moving? Were both moving? Had he measured it wrongly before? Was it even the same light?

One observation gave no answer.

He deliberately altered course again, this time back.

The light responded in a way that did not fit a distant star.

‘Good,’ Odis said.

He felt strangely satisfied.

Not because he knew what it was, but because one possibility had become less likely.

He had done something to the world and the world had answered differently.

Five minutes later the object appeared on AIS.

A small cargo ship. Its transponder had evidently been temporarily invisible. The calculated passing distance was more than adequate.

Odis looked at its name, speed and course.

Suddenly the mystery was gone.

Almost disappointingly quickly.

A white light had become a ship.

But of course the ship had not come into being when its name appeared on his screen.

It was he who had changed.

Or, more precisely: what he still considered possible.

He went on watching the cargo ship long after it had passed safely astern of him.

9 — What Penny knew

By now Penny had filled seven pages.

Not because she had intended to. The notebook had simply stayed there.

She recorded the times when Odis called, but also things that had nothing to do with safety.

He had said he had met an old fisherman in Port Keravel. That the man had called the sea ‘angry’. That Odis had drawn three routes. That there had been a light in the night.

Penny did not only write down what Odis said.

She also wrote down what he did not say.

On day six, for instance, he had talked at length about the old man, but said nothing about the mistake at the harbour until she asked. On day seven he said three times that the weather was ‘fine’. At home he only used that word when something was not fine but he did not feel like talking about it.

She wrote:

Fine = ask more questions.

That made her laugh.

Later that evening she looked at the line and thought that perhaps this was what it meant to know someone for a long time. Not that you knew what he was thinking, but that words acquired extra meanings through their history.

If a stranger told her everything was fine, it probably meant everything was fine.

If Odis said it in the wrong tone, it could mean the opposite.

The word was the same.

The relationship around it was not.

She called him.

‘How are things?’

‘Fine.’

Penny looked at her notebook.

‘What’s wrong?’

There was a brief silence at the other end.

‘Nothing.’

‘Odis.’

‘I slept badly.’

‘Why?’

‘There was a ship last night.’

‘A ship at sea isn’t exactly unusual, is it?’

‘No.’

‘But?’

He told her about the light.

Penny listened.

‘So you didn’t know what you were seeing.’

‘Exactly.’

‘And then you deliberately went a different way to see what the light would do.’

‘Yes.’

‘That sounds dangerous.’

‘Altering course a little isn’t dangerous.’

‘That’s not what I mean.’

‘What, then?’

‘That apparently it makes you happy when reality talks back.’

Odis said nothing.

‘You sound as though you’re smiling now,’ Penny said.

‘You can’t possibly know that.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘But I have a model.’

He laughed.

It was the first time since he had left that Penny had heard him laugh without trying to laugh something off.

10 — The body aboard

After a week his body began to protest against the journey in ways that had nothing heroic about them. His lower back hurt. The skin between two toes had gone soft. There was a cut on his right hand that kept reopening because everything he touched was salty.

He could smell himself. That was new. On land a person continually vanished into soap, clean clothes, rooms, other people. Here his own smell was in his jumper, sleeping bag and pillow: sweat, salt, diesel and something sour that repelled him.

One afternoon he washed with half a litre of fresh water and a cloth. It felt more luxurious than almost anything he had called luxury at home.

He boiled potatoes and ate them with far too much butter and salt. The first mouthful was so good that he closed his eyes. He noticed he was eating more slowly. Not out of good manners, but because the meal had become an event.

Afterwards he did not clear up. He sat in the cockpit looking at nothing for almost an hour.

Boredom turned out not to be empty. It was full of impulses. Pick up the phone. Open a locker. Look at a weather chart he had looked at ten minutes earlier. Check the course when the course had not changed. Eat something without being hungry. Think about sex. Think about home. Think about why he thought about sex whenever he was bored. Laugh at that too.

He began making a list of things he missed. Penny was not at the top. At the top was: a shower in which you don’t have to think about water.

Then: fresh bread. A chair that doesn’t move. A toilet you don’t have to understand first. The sound of someone in another room.

Only at number seven did he write Penny.

He stared at the word and felt guilty.

Then he added: because you are in all the other things.

That evening he read it back and found it sentimental. He did not cross it out.

11 — The first break

On the ninth day the steering cable broke.