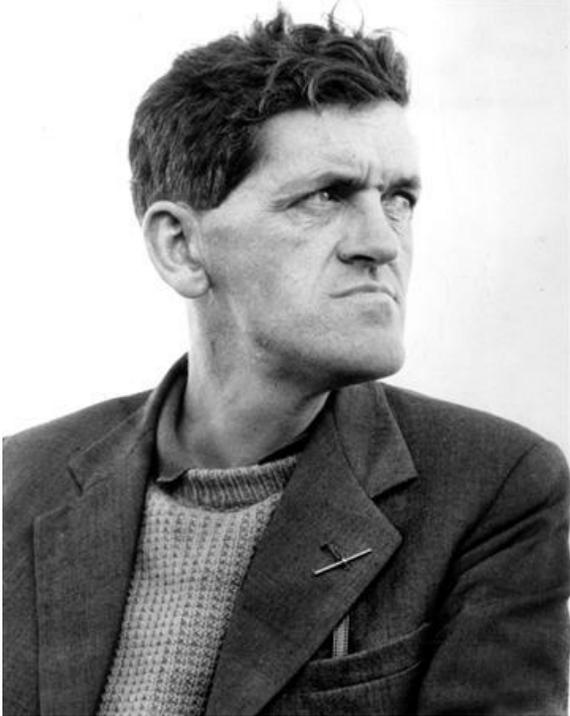


Andrina (1983)

By George Mackay Brown (Scotland)



George Mackay Brown
1921-1996

Andrina comes to see me every afternoon in winter just before it gets dark. She lights my lamp, sets the peat¹ fire in a blaze, sees that there is enough water in my bucket that stands on the wall niche². If I have a cold (which isn't often, I'm a tough old seaman) she fusses a little, puts an extra peat or two on the fire, fills a stone hot-water bottle, and puts an old thick jersey about my shoulders.

That good Andrina-- as soon as she has gone, after her occasional ministrations to keep pleurisy³ or pneumonia away-- I throw the jersey from my shoulders and mix myself a toddy, whisky and hot water and sugar. The hot-water bottle in the bed will be cold long before I climb into it, round about midnight: having read my few chapters of Conrad⁴.

Towards the end of February last year I did get a very bad cold, the worst for years. I woke up, shuddering, one morning and crawled between fire and cupboard gasping like a fish out of water, to get a breakfast ready. (Not that I had an appetite.) There was a stone lodged somewhere in my right lung, that blocked my breath.

I forced down a few tasteless mouthfuls and drank hot ugly tea. There was nothing to do after that but get back to bed with my book. Reading was no pleasure either-- my head was a block of pulsing wood.

"Well," I thought, "Andrina'll be here in five or six hours' time. She won't be able to do much for me. This cold, or flu, or whatever it is, will run its course. Still, it'll cheer me to see the girl."

* * *

Andrina did not come that afternoon. I expected her with the first cluster of shadows: the slow lift of the latch, the low greeting, the 'tut-

¹ a brown, soil-like material characteristic of boggy, acid ground, consisting of partly decomposed vegetable matter; it is widely cut and dried for use as fuel

² a shallow recess

³ an inflammation of the lining surrounding the lungs

⁴ English novelist (born in Poland) noted for sea stories

tut' of sweet disapproval at some of the things she saw as soon as the lamp was burning... I was, though, in that strange fatalistic mood that sometimes accompanies a fever, when a man doesn't really care what happens. If the house was to go on fire, he might think, "What's this, flames?" and try to save himself: but it wouldn't horrify or thrill him.

I accepted that afternoon, when the window was blackness at last with a first salting of stars, that for some reason or another Andrina couldn't come. I fell asleep again.

I woke up. A grey light at the window. My throat was dry-- there was a fire in my face-- my head was more throbbingly wooden than ever. I got up, my feet flashing with cold pain on the stone floor, drank a cup of water and climbed back into bed. My teeth actually clacked and chattered in my head for five minutes or more-- a thing I had only read about before.

I slept again, and woke up just as the winter sun was making brief stained glass of sea and sky. It was, again, Andrina's time. Today there were things she could do for me: get aspirin from the shop, surround my greyness with three or four very hot bottles, mix the strongest toddy in the world. A few words from her would be like a bell-buoy⁵ to sailor lost in a hopeless fog. She did not come.

She did not come again on the third afternoon.

I woke, tremblingly, like a ghost in a hollow stone. It was black night. Wind soughed in the chimney. There was, from time-to-time, spatters of rain against the window. It was the longest night of my life. I experienced, over again, some of the dull and sordid events of my life; one certain episode was repeated again and again like an ancient gramophone⁶ record being put on time after time, and a rusty needle scuttling over the worn wax⁷. The shameful images broke and melted at last into sleep. Love had been killed but many ghosts had been awakened.



Like much of George Mackay Brown's fiction, "Andrina" is set in the Orkney Islands in the extreme north of Scotland.

⁵ a buoy equipped with a bell rung by the motion of the sea, warning nearby vessels of shallow waters

⁶ old-fashioned term for record player

⁷ early records were made of wax

When I woke up I heard for the first time in four days, the sound of a voice. It was Stanley the postman speaking to the dog of Bighouse. "There now, isn't that loud big words to say so early? It's just a letter for Minnie, a drapery catalogue. There's a good boy, go and tell Minnie I have a love letter for her. Is that you Minnie? I thought old Ben here was going to tear me in pieces then. Yes, Minnie, a fine morning, it is that..."

I have never liked that postman-- a servile lickspittle to anyone he thinks is of consequence in the island-- but that morning he came past my window like a messenger of light. He opened the door without knocking (I am a person of small consequence). He said, "Letter from a long-distance, skipper." He put the letter on the chair nearest the door. I was shaping my mouth to say, "I'm not very well. I wonder..." If words did come out of my mouth, they must have been whispers, a ghost appeal. He looked at the dead fire and the closed window. He said, "Phew! It's foggy in here, skipper. You want to get some fresh air..." Then he went, closing the door behind him. (He would not, as I had briefly hoped, be taking word to Andrina, or the doctor down in the village.)

I imagined, until I drowsed again, Captain Scott⁸ writing his few last words in the Antarctic tent.

In a day or two, of course, I was as right as rain; a tough old salt like me isn't killed off that easily.

But there was a sense of desolation on me. It was as if I had been betrayed-- deliberately kicked when I was down. I came almost to the verge of self-pity. Why had my friends left me in my bad time?

Then good sense asserted itself. "Torvald, you old fraud," I said to myself. "What claim have you got, anyway, on a winsome⁹ twenty-year-old? None at all. Look at it this way, man-- you've had a whole winter of her kindness and consideration. She brought a lamp into your dark time: ever since the Harvest Home¹⁰ when (like a fool) you had too much whisky and she supported you home and rolled you unconscious into bed... Well for some



Captain Robert Falcon Scott

⁸ Captain Robert Falcon Scott (1868-1912: English explorer who reached the South Pole just a month after Roald Amundsen, the first person to reach the South Pole; he and his party died on the return journey

⁹ attractive or appealing in appearance or character

¹⁰ traditional English harvest festival, still celebrated in isolated regions

reason or another Andrina hasn't been able to come these last few days. I'll find out, today, the reason."

It was high time for me to get to the village. There was not a crust or scraping of butter or jam in the cupboard. The shop was also the Post Office-- I had to draw two weeks' pension. I promised myself a pint or two in the pub, to wash the last of the sickness out of me.

It struck me, as I trudged-- those two miles that I knew nothing about Andrina at all. I had never asked, and she had said nothing. What was her father? Had she sisters and brothers? Even the district of the island where she lived had never cropped up in our talks. It was sufficient that she came every evening, soon after sunset, and performed her quiet ministrations¹¹, and lingered awhile; and left a peace behind-- a sense that everything in the house was pure, as if it had stood with open doors and windows at the heart of a clean summer wind.



Captain Hook

One story I did not tell her completely. It is the episode in my life that hurts me whenever I think of it (which is rarely, for that time is locked up and the key dropped deep in the Atlantic: but it haunted me-- as I hinted-- during my recent illness).

Yet the girl had never done, all last winter, asking me questions about myself-- all the good and bad and exciting things that had happened to me. Of course I told her this and that. Old men love to make their past vivid and significant, to stand in relation to a few trivial events in as fair and bold a light as possible. To add spice to those bits of autobiography, I let on to have been a reckless wild daring lad-- a known and somewhat feared figure in many a port from Hong Kong to Durban to San Francisco. I presented to her a character somewhere between Captain Cook¹² and Captain Hook¹³.

And the girl loved those pieces of mingled fiction and fact; turning the wick of my lamp down a little to make everything more mysterious, stirring the peats into new flowers of flame...

¹¹ the provision of assistance or care

¹² Captain James Cook (1728 -1779): English explorer, navigator, cartographer, and captain in the Royal Navy

¹³ a fictional pirate captain, the antagonist of J. M. Barrie's play Peter Pan; or, the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up and its various adaptations

On her last evening at my fireside I did, I know, let drop a hint or two to Andrina-- a few half-ashamed half-boastful fragments. Suddenly, before I had finished-- as if she could foresee and suffer the end-- she had put on a white look and a cold kiss on my cheek, and gone out at the door; as it turned out, for the last time.

Hurt or no, I will mention it here and now. You who look and listen are not Andrina-- to you it will seem a tale of crude country manners: a mingling of innocence and heartlessness.

In the island, fifty years ago, a young man and a young woman came together. They had known each other all their lives up to then of course-- they had sat in the school room together-- but on one particular day in early summer this boy from one croft¹⁴ and this girl from another distant croft looked at each other with new eyes.



Orkney Islands beach

After the midsummer dance in the barn of the big house, they walked together across the hill through the lingering enchantment of twilight-- it is never dark then-- and came to the rocks and the sand and sea just as the sun was rising. For an hour or more they lingered, tranced creatures indeed, beside those bright sightings and swirlings. Far in the north-east the springs of day were beginning to surge up.

It was a tale soaked in the light of a single brief summer. The boy and the girl lived, it seemed, on each other's heartbeats. Their parents' crofts were miles apart, but they contrived to meet, as if by accident,

¹⁴ a small rented farm, especially one in Scotland

most days: at the crossroads, in the village shop, on the side of the hill. But really these places were too earthy and open-- there were too many windows-- their feet drew secretly night after night to the beach with its bird cries, its cave, its changing waters. There no one disturbed their communings-- the shy touches of hand and mouth-- the words that were nonsense but that became in his mouth sometimes a sweet mysterious music-- 'Sigrid'¹⁵.

The boy-- his future, once this idyll¹⁶ of a summer was ended, was to go to the University in Aberdeen and there study to be a man of security and position and some leisure-- an estate his crofting ancestors had never known.

No such door was to open for Sigrid-- she-- was bound to the few family acres-- the digging of peat-- the making of butter and cheese. But for a short time only. Her place would be beside the young man with whom she shared her breath and heart-beats, once he had gained his teacher's certificate. They walked day after day beside shining beckoning waters.

But one evening, at the cave, toward the end of that summer, when the corn was taking a first burnish, she had something urgent to tell him-- a tremulous¹⁷ perilous secret thing. And at once the summertime spell was broken. He shook his head. He looked away. He looked at her again as if she were some slut who had insulted him. She put out her hand to him, her mouth trembling. He



Orkney Islands beach

thrust her away. He turned. He ran up the beach and along the sand-track to the road above and the ripening fields gathered him soon and hid him from her.

And the girl was left at the mouth of the cave, with the burden of a greater more desolate mystery on her.

The young man did not go to any seat of higher learning. That same day he was at the emigration agents in Hamnavoe¹⁸, asking for an urgent immediate passage to Canada or Australia or South Africa-- anywhere.

¹⁵ i.e., the girl's name

¹⁶ an extremely happy, peaceful, or picturesque episode or scene, typically an idealized or unsustainable one

¹⁷ shaking or quivering slightly

¹⁸ what is now the town of Stromness in Orkney

Thereafter the tale became complicated and more cruel and pathetic still. The girl followed him as best she could to his transatlantic refuge a month or so later; only to discover that the bird had flown. He had signed on a ship bound for furthest ports, as an ordinary seaman: so she was told, and she was more utterly lost than ever.

That rootlessness, for the next half century, was to be his life: making salt circles about the globe, with no secure footage anywhere. To be sure, he studied his navigation manuals; he rose at last to be a ship's officer, and more. The barren years became a burden to him. There is a time, when white hairs come, to turn one's back on long and practised skills and arts, that have long since lost their savours. This the sailor did, and he set his course homeward to his island: hoping that fifty winters might have scabbed over an old wound.

And so it was, or seemed to be. A few remembered him vaguely. The name of a certain vanished woman-- who must be elderly, like himself, now-- he never mentioned, nor did he ever hear it uttered. Her parents' croft was a ruin; a ruckle¹⁹ of stone on the side of the hill. He climbed up to it one day and looked at it coldly. No sweet ghost lingered at the end of the house waiting for a twilight summons-- 'Sigrid...'



Orkney Islands village

I got my pension cashed, and a basket full of provisions, in the village shop. Tina Stewart the postmistress knew everybody and everything: all the shifting subtle web of relationship in the island. I tried devious approaches with her. What was new or strange on the island? Had anyone been taken suddenly ill? Had anybody-- a young woman, for example-- had to leave

¹⁹ a multitude; a throng

the island suddenly, for whatever reason? The hawk eye of Miss Stewart regarded me long and hard.

No, said she, she had never known the island quieter. Nobody had come or gone. "Only yourself, Captain Torvald, has been bedridden I hear. You better take good care of yourself, you all alone up there. There's still a greyness in your face..." I said I was sorry to take her time up. Somebody had mentioned a name-- Andrina-- to me, in a certain connection. It was a matter of no importance. Could Miss Stewart, however, tell me which farm or croft this Andrina came from?

Tina looked at me a long while, then shook her head. There was nobody of that name-- woman or girl or child-- in the island: and there never had been to her certain knowledge.

I paid for my messages, with trembling fingers, and left.

I felt the need of a drink. At the bar counter stood Isaac Irving the landlord. Two fishermen stood at the far end, next to the fire, drinking their pints and playing dominoes. I said, after the third whisky, "Look, Isaac, I suppose the whole island knows that Andrina-- that girl-- has been coming all winter up to my place, to do a bit of cleaning and washing and cooking



Orkney Islands pub

for me. She hasn't been for a week now and more. Do you know if there's anything the matter with her?" (What I dreaded to hear was that Andrina had suddenly fallen in love; her little rock-pools of charity and kindness drowned in that huge incoming flood; and had cloistered herself against the time of her wedding.)

Isaac looked at me as if I was out of my mind. "A young woman," said he. "A young woman up at your house? A home help, is she? I didn't know you had a home help. How many whiskies did you have before you came here, skipper, eh?" And he winked at the two grinning fishermen over by the fire.

I drank down my fourth whisky and prepared to go.

"Sorry, skipper," Isaac Irving called after me. "I think you must have imagined that girl, whatever her name is, when the fever was on you. Sometimes that happens. The only women I saw when I had the flu were hags and witches. You're lucky, skipper-- a honey like Andrina!"

I was utterly bewildered. Isaac Irving knows the island and its people, if anything, even better than Tina Stewart. And he is a kindly man, not given to making fools of the lost and delusion-ridden.

* * *

Going home, March airs were moving over the island. The sky, almost overnight, was taller and bluer. Daffodils trumpeted, silently, the entry of spring from ditches here and there. A young lamb danced, all four feet in the air at once.

I found, lying on the table, unopened, the letter that had been delivered three mornings ago. There was an Australian postmark. It had been posted in late October.

"I followed your flight from Selskay half round the world, and at last stopped here in Tasmania, knowing that it was useless for me to go any farther. I have kept a silence too, because I had such regard for you that I did not want you to suffer as I had, in many ways, over the years. We are both old, maybe I am writing this in vain, for you might never have returned to Selskay; or you might be dust or salt. I think, if you are still alive and (it may be) lonely, that what I will write might gladden you, though the end of it is sadness, like so much of life. Of your child-- our child-- I do not say anything, because you did not wish to acknowledge her. But that child had, in her turn, a daughter, and I think I have seen such sweetness but rarely. I thank you that you, in a sense (though unwillingly), gave that light and goodness to my age. She would have been a lamp in your winter, too, for often I spoke to her about you and that long-gone summer we shared, which was, to me at least, such a wonder. I told her nothing of the end of that time, that you and some others thought to be shameful. I told her only things that came sweetly from my mouth. And she would say, often, 'I wish I knew that grandfather of mine. Gran, do you think he's lonely? I think he would be glad of somebody to make him a pot of tea and see to his fire. Some day I'm going to Scotland and I'm going to knock on his door, wherever he lives, and I'll do things for him. Did you love him very much Gran? He must be a good person, that old sailor, ever to have been loved by you. I will see him. I'll hear the old stories from his own mouth. Most of all, of course, the love story-- for you, Gran, tell me nothing about that...' I am writing this letter, Bill, to tell you that this can never now be. Our granddaughter Andrina died last week, suddenly, in the first stirrings of spring."

Later, over the fire, I thought of the brightness and burgeoning and dew that visitant had brought across the threshold of my latest winter, night after night; and of how she had always come with the first shadows and the first star; but there, where she was dust, a new time was brightening earth and sea.