After reading the Prologue in our print version, please continue to enjoy reading this novel-in-progress here, with Chapters One and Two.

One

Charlotte’s house was painted fire engine red. Jess blinked at it as she crossed the muddy road with Annalise, and wondered how something so vibrant could exist here amid all the bleakness. The rain beat against it from every conceivable angle so that she could almost see it fade as they drew closer. The road was all that separated Annalise’s cottage from Charlotte’s.

Annalise let herself in, holding open the sky-blue door for Jess. Charlotte hurried toward them down a narrow hall, her auburn hair askew and wearing a misshapen sweater with the sleeves pushed up. She wasn’t particularly old or young.

“So, Charlotte. This is Jess.” Annalise touched Jess’s shoulder and when Jess looked up at her, uncertain, she saw traces of tired years in her face.

Charlotte stepped back and regarded Jess until the ghost of tears took shape in her dark eyes.

“It’s so good to see you again. It’s been such a long time.” She brushed past to take their coats to a bedroom. The entryway was small. Jess breathed in the smell of wood smoke and wished that everyone would stop being so sad all of the time. She was beginning to feel like an ignorant invader in a mourning town.

“Let’s go in. You have lots of people to meet.” Annalise smiled and maybe it was genuine. They pushed open a heavy door together and a distant river of voices exploded. Half the town had been invited, Annalise had said. But Jess knew that the town only had twenty people, so what would give ten people reason to make such a ruckus?

“Tea! Of course, you’ll want some. Let me get you each a nice mug to shake this chill.” Charlotte had reappeared with clear eyes.

Jess took a sip and it burned the way hot water and leaves didn’t. But it wasn’t all that bad and even her fingertips were finally warm. She glanced around the room. It was cramped with candles and talking. A fireplace had drawn people together in an uneven circle.
“Meredith! Maggie! This here is Jess. She’s Annalise’s niece come to stay with her for the summer.” Charlotte had led Jess over to a couch where two women were seated. One was very tall with a long braid and the other looked quickly up with brilliantly blue eyes. Jess had no idea who was who.

“Nice to meet you, Jess. Where are you from, now?”

“Edinburgh.” She watched for signs of crying.

“You must be Iris’s daughter. You look exactly like she did.”

“You knew her?” Jess tried not to gasp or make her eyes too wide, but felt that she was failing, which was bad. A slight mention of Iris’s name had made Annalise quiet and gloomy earlier in the day.

“Of course I knew her! She was around in Easterly now and then.”

The room seemed to get hazy and distant. She had been here, maybe even stood right here on this floor. Meredith or Maggie started to say something else, but Charlotte tugged on Jess’s shoulder. She was talking. Jess forced herself back to the crispness of reality with a long sip of tea. And as she trailed behind Charlotte, Annalise’s voice drifted to her from across the room, low and hushed.

“I already slipped once today and called her Iris. She must think I’m insane. No idea how much she knows...”

“This is Jess, everyone! She’s Annalise’s! My new neighbor for the summer!” Charlotte brought any further eavesdropping to an abrupt end with her sloppy introduction.

Lots of people looked up from the low chairs near the hearth. There was Owen, Ray, Alma, Eliot, Asa... Again, Charlotte didn’t get specific about matching up the names and the people. She leaned down to say that Owen was a bachelor farmer out on the highlands. And that Ray and Alma owned a pigeon farm.

Flannel and wool and faded jeans nearly obscured the furniture. Jess turned around and forgot all of their names.

Charlotte wasn’t a big person, but her presence demanded a certain reverence, especially here in her own house. Jess trailed her away from the fire and twisted a strand of hair around her finger. It was the same dark brown as Annalise’s. Jess had noticed that immediately upon arrival in Easterly. It was the first sign – and then there had been more – that she would settle in with a miraculous sense of belonging. But behind her, the swarm of people with their strange names and mysterious lives were slowly and obliviously cancelling out every one of what Jess had dared to call omens only an hour before. They laughed at things that baffled her and threaded their lives around an entirely different frame than the one she pretended to know.

Charlotte cornered Eliot as he was refilling his mug and took the opportunity to summarize his existence.
“Oh, you’ll see plenty of Eliot before the summer’s out. He’s Meredith’s husband. And their son Asa is standing over by the fire. Now, Eliot owns two hundred goats! You’ll see them too. They run wild.”

The goats or the whole family? Jess tried to catch sight of Asa amidst the intimidating group of farmers that she had just left. He looked nothing like Eliot, who had dark hair and blue eyes. Asa’s hair was exactly the same color as the sandstone fireplace he was leaning against.

And then Jess was whisked off to the far corner of a kitchen. A girl with frantically curly hair was stirring a pot of something over the stove.

“Oh, stop fussing with that, Sage. I said I would watch it! Here, meet Jess. Annalise’s niece. You two girls must be about the same age?” Charlotte seized the wooden spoon out of Sage’s hand, and gave her a little shove out towards Jess and the other people.

“Sixteen? Am I right?” She narrowed her eyes in concentration and then looked extremely pleased as they both nodded.

“Jess, darling, help yourself to food out on the table. The stew will be up in a minute.” She began humming and stirring, pausing only long enough to take a lingering sip from her mug.

Sage wiped her hands on a dishtowel and pushed back a bleach blond, almost white, curl that had been dangling in her eyes.

“Well, hi, Jess. When did you get here?” She leaned against the kitchen door frame, surveying the crowd.

“Yesterday – I mean, today. I left home yesterday.” Jess grimaced and wished that this whole night would hurry up and end. Even Charlotte’s house seemed to be contemplating her character and raising its eyebrows behind her back.

Sage smiled. “This rain’s great isn’t it? A nice highlands welcome.”

“Will it be like this all summe?” Jess asked, not really wanting to know.

“It depends on the year. It seems like you’re in for about the worst on record.” Sage led Jess away from the door of the kitchen after spying Charlotte giving her a very pointed look. They found some empty chairs next to Owen in the ring by the fire.

“How’s it going there, Sage? School out?”

“Yes. This is my second week of break already.”

He turned to Asa, who was slouched in a chair. “You out of school too? Or were you ever in this year?!” And a roar of laughter and a sip of tea.
“I probably learned more than Sage ever will.” But he didn’t really look that defensive. Sage rolled her eyes, and kicked his shin in such a well-rehearsed motion that Jess had to assume disagreements were rather common. Neither of them actually looked mad.

“Asa is what we call homeschooled,” said Owen, “which means he spends all of his time running around the highlands while Sage is at school.” He was becoming a bit hysterical. The world was hilarious and there was nothing to do about it.

“Isn’t there a law? I mean, do you learn stuff?”

“Not according to them.” Asa shrugged and looked impassive.

Jess turned to Sage. “Is there a school here?”

“Are you kidding? We barely even have a grocery store! I take a bus to Braidon.”

They were all quiet for a minute. Sage narrowed her eyes.

“If you want to know the first thing about this town, you might start with some facts. Our population is twenty-five.”

“Twenty-six!” said Owen.

“Okay. And of those twenty-six, five are under eighteen. That’s me, him, some seven-year-old twins and a baby.” Sage stared accusingly into the fire. “We have a grocery store, which mostly sells animal feed, a hardware store, a gas station and a bar. In the winter, if we want to plow the two streets in this town, we ask a farmer to bring his tractor in.”

Jess studied a stack of wood against the wall. The upcoming summer was starting to seem bigger and more imposing. But Owen looked delighted with the bleak picture of Easterly.

“This is a goddamn frontier town!” he said. “We don’t mess around with the comforts of the city. See this scar on my hand? This here is from the winter of ’88. Hell of a storm come in and like she said, no plows—”

“The stew is served!” Charlotte suddenly bellowed from the doorway. Jess jumped, and the winter of ’88 was forgotten as Owen led the charge into the kitchen.

She turned to Sage, but her gray eyes had lost their hard glare.

“Better get into the kitchen if you plan on eating,” she said. They heard the rain drum on the roof. Hours passed.

Near ten o’clock Sage’s dad arrived, soaked and mud-strewn, on the doorstep.

“Greg! Good Lord! What took you so long?” Charlotte rushed over with a bowl of soup before he even had his coat off.
“Oh – thanks. I was setting markers. They needed to be in place before midnight.” When Charlotte looked blank, he went on. “It’s for the hunting season...opens tomorrow...we’ve already had a lot of people coming to get licenses and-”

“A hunting season for what? For what, Greg!” Charlotte’s voice had been soft, clear, confident, but never like this. Jess looked up and could almost touch the panic that cut through the vulnerable room.

“Wolves.”

The bowl of stew fell from Charlotte’s hands and smashed across the floor. She collapsed against the wall like a dying leaf. He looked down.

“Charlotte...I...”

Everyone who had been shocked into silence suddenly came to life. Alma rushed Charlotte, shouldering Jess aside. From where she was, Jess heard fragments.

“Mixed company! Don’t you --- so, so, so obvious! We don’t know that! I know, I know...but don’t think about that yet! Jess needn’t hear.” She pushed Charlotte away from the others and into a room that Jess hadn’t noticed. Annalise ran in after them, quietly closing the door on the relative chaos of seven people cleaning up soup.

Greg and Sage and Maggie left within minutes. He had tried to explain himself to anyone who would listen. But he was met with furious stares. Of course he didn’t like the hunting either, but it wasn’t up to him! He would lose his job – didn’t they understand? Sage practically pulled him out the front door.

Jess retreated to the kitchen.

“We’ll see what happens after a few days. Your farm is the farthest out, you’ll...be the first to notice. But, God, I hate to think what we’re in for. They never take kindly to hunting...especially the wolves! Hunting the wolves!” Jess recognized Ray’s voice through the kitchen wall.

“But if there is any sort of trouble... Jesus! Half of us are still in shock from the last time.” It was Owen.

“It’s been fifteen years now. I wouldn’t say I’m in shock, but still...”

“Where is she? She was by the door – shhhh!”

“You’re not expecting to keep this away from Iris’s daughter are you? She has the right to know.”

“But she just got here. And she may never have to know.”
Ray snorted and they were both walking out of the kitchen, heads down. Jess darted over to the fireplace and feigned nonchalance. But every word had seared into the deep unfailing part of her conscious, which was reserved for potentially confidential information and anything to do with Iris.

The words were ominous, though. And there were Annalise and Charlotte blinking away tears every other time they looked at her or mentioned her mother. Something was irrevocably wrong and Jess could only wonder at the scraps of clues. But Iris was present here, more than ever in Jess’s memory. Here, in a cozy house in this remote and pathetic village called Easterly.

Two

“What was that about anyway?” Jess stirred a bowl of porridge and waited for Annalise to realize how badly she needed answers. They had been talking about the events of the last night and the general pandemonium about wolves.

“There’s a lot to it.” Annalise sipped her tea and watched the morning sun being swallowed by a bank of rainclouds. “None of us want to see the highlands get destroyed.”

“But Greg said that there were already too many wolves and that hunting would be good.”

“He said it would be good? Jesus! It’s not like we’re living in a science experiment. Does he even know what he’s dealing with? Aiming to kill us all.” She slammed her chair back against the wall and began scrubbing dishes as if to kill them. Jess slunk low in her chair, eyes wide.

“What’s he dealing with?”

“The highlands.”

“And...do they kill people?”

“You’d be surprised.” After a few seconds of silence, Annalise’s shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry Jess. I’m just not very happy about the wolves.”

They were quiet for a few minutes.

“Last night, Charlotte said that it was good to see me again.” Jess looked through the kitchen door to the rest of the cottage. “But I don’t think I’ve ever seen her before.”

“You were barely a year old. Of course you don’t remember.” Annalise smiled, stacking clean dishes in a cupboard. “You and your mom came to live with me for about a year. Charlotte was staying here too while her house was being fixed up.”

“We lived here.” It was not entirely a question or a statement. Jess slowly stood and ran her hand along the windowsill, the bookcase, the back of an old armchair. She had been here for an entire day without knowing that Iris was everywhere. Suddenly, everything was holy.

“You look just like her, you know.” Annalise didn’t seem sad, like she had yesterday.
“Why did we leave? I mean, you said only one year...” Jess’s voice trailed off. The timeframe lined up a bit too perfectly. “Iris never left, did she?” Her voice was barely above a whisper. Annalise shook her head.

A shrill and terrible noise echoed through the kitchen and proved to be an antique-looking telephone hanging on the wall. Alma was calling with a grand proposition that she and Ray had thought up on the way home from Charlotte’s house the night before. They were getting older and their farm could use some extra hands. Annalise relayed the message to Jess, who slowly nodded. She was not entirely sure about the quickest way to blend into highland life, but looking like a lazy city girl couldn’t possibly help.

Annalise hung up the phone and then remembered that her car wasn’t working - it hadn’t been working in months, actually, but that was hard to remember since it scarcely left the driveway. Jess blinked.

“How far away is the farm?”

“Mmmm, a pretty fair distance. But I have a spare bike you could use.”

It was five miles away, and although the road started out flat, it was loose gravel and the last mile or so gave way to steep hills. The bleakness and emptiness played with Jess’s mind and she found herself straining to hear the slightest sounds in the wind. She would have stopped, but standing still, a slight shadow along the roadside, would have been too terrifying in that lurking-fear way the highlands had. Owen and Ray’s furtive conversation drifted in and out of her mind, as did the ominous news that Iris had died here, somewhere.

Iris was an obsession, a life-line, and a half forgotten memory. She was the faded picture in Jess’s mind and the nebulous cure for all of her problems and woes. In her entire life with Lawrence in Edinburgh, she had learned precisely two things about Iris: she died young, while Jess was still a baby; and she should not be mentioned around Lawrence or even Debbie – especially Debbie. If Lawrence had just told her, shown her just one picture, said her name... But Jess knew he never would. Her father wasn’t sentimental, at least on the surface. She had the impression that he was always hiding anger, though. Anger directed at Jess for existing and at Iris for not.

The landscape and its complementary cloudscape dragged on, the road a meager scar adrift in the grass. But finally a ramshackle sign pointed to a little track that veered off the road and up a steep hill. The sign read: “Pigeon Mountain: A Peculiar Collection of the Good Things in Life, Ray and Alma Murdo, Est. 1979.” The words, etched into sloppily painted barn wood, looked like a poorly written fairytale. Jess smiled and ran her finger over the fancy cursive. It fit her impression of Alma from the night before: round and pleasant face that could have belonged to a forest-gnome, a shawl that looked like a flannel blanket around her shoulders, barely reaching five feet tall on tiptoe.

As soon as the farmyard came into sight, quaintly sprawled across a hillside, it was lost again behind a wall of fur and the din of what sounded like a hundred dogs. Before she could scream or fight
back or even cover her neck from the assault, the pack suddenly leapt back and silenced its howling.

Jess found herself sitting on the ground a dozen yards away from her bike.

“How you doing, there Jess?” Ray shouted from the doorway of a barn. Jess gaped at him. But the fearsome dogs were now slinking and whining around his legs. A huge and battle-scarred gray one was even lying on its back, begging forgiveness.

“Stupid, worthless creatures!” Ray waded through the pack. “Move, ya mangy skunk! Porch, everybody! I said! Porch!” And they all dove underneath the front porch of a small cottage in the center of the farm. It wasn’t a hundred, but there were at least twelve: a collie, at least three huskies, a wildly shrieking terrier, a few hounds and a collection of mutts. Jess picked herself up. As Ray got closer, the slap of rubber boots was audible.

“Glad to see you made it out here okay, Jess. Forgot to mention that we’re a bit remote. How do you like the pack?” He pointed to the tail of the last dog as it wiggled out of sight. “Pathetic, really.”

“They seemed like pretty good guard dogs to me.” Jess was slowly daring to think that she had come out of the incident without a scratch.

“Oh, but they’re wimps. Scared of a shadow. All you got to do is say HEEEL and it shuts ‘em right up.” Ray’s meager supply of teeth looked like survivors of a war.

Jess nearly collapsed again at the unexpected bellow, but managed a nod. She doubted that her voice would be strong enough to hold off even one of the dogs.

“Right. So, welcome to the farm. How ‘bout a little tour to start you off.” He turned and began walking away with huge strides. His boots slapping, slapping.


Jess was nearly running to keep up. They jumped over a stonewall and crossed a creek on a rickety log bridge and then stopped at the top of a hill.

“This,” said Ray, with great finality, “is the dovecot. This is where you will be working. This is the heart and soul of the farm.” Jess looked dubiously at the rickety little building. It had been painted white at one point, but now it was weathered and leaning precariously to one side. Shingles were missing, but the roof was round and somewhat idyllic.

“Go on then, there’s the door,” said Ray. Jess stepped inside and was immediately surrounded by thousands of little trills and coos. All around were flight pens that spanned the dark barn and the gray outside. Pigeons trundled about on the ground, on branches interlacing the cages, in nest boxes, even clinging to the vertical wire.

“They’re beautiful!” She stepped close to the first pen to get a better look at its inhabitants. A dusky gray pigeon tilted its head up at her and then went back to feeding.
The dovecot turned out to be two stories tall, with a hidden lower level under the hill. Alma climbed up a ladder to the upper story and greeted Jess. Her face was streaked with dirt and her light brown hair was wound into a loose braid that nearly reached her waist.

“Oh, I didn’t even know you were here. Do you like the doves?” She opened the door of a cage the size of a room and beckoned for Jess to follow her inside. Birds flew around them with papery wing beats and confused voices.

“I love them. What kind are they?”

“These here are German Owls. But the one up on the branch there is a ringneck. We have all different kinds. People come from all over the country to buy our birds. We’ve got pure bloodlines here and that’s a mighty rare feat nowadays. And there is magic in the way our birds turn out. I blame it on the countryside. Now, I’m going to teach you how to hold a dove. It’ll be your first lesson.” She looked up at Jess with eyebrows raised in seriousness.

“Now, hold out your right hand, palm up like this. Hmmm, you’ve got small hands, though. Best start you out with a young dove.” She scooped one up from the nearest flight pen. “Palm up, make sure there’s a gap between your pointer finger and middle finger. I’ll just set him on your hand with his feet together between your fingers so they dangle down and don’t get in the way. Like this…” The pigeon was dusky gray and didn’t struggle at he was nestled into Jess’s hand, facing her. “Hold him steady with your left hand; keep his wings from flapping…” Alma hovered around nervously, but the dove made no attempts at a struggle. His feathers were like a silk cloud.

The day was mostly first lessons and very little work. Jess cradled a newly hatched pigeon in her hand and listened as Ray and Alma alternately filled her mind with anything they could recall about pigeons. They were forgetful and she learned how to clean a water dish twice and how to diagnose bumblefoot at least three times, but she didn’t mind. The birds were fascinating.

Then, abruptly, they left, Ray to the cottage and Alma to the ragtag flock of chickens. Jess was left with a scrub brush, some bleach water and vague instructions for sanitizing an empty flight cage. She opened the door, and then took a step backwards as if the filth would crawl out of the pen and attack her. It looked like a horrific avian disease, especially with the damp weather drifting in the windows and algae from a waterer creeping outwards across the floor.

She considered asking Ray for a hazmat suit and confessing that she had been raised in a city and even though she could now confidently identify bumblefoot, soiled roost bars were a different matter entirely. But then, she heard Alma come in the door behind her. Jess knelt down gingerly and dipped the corner of a bristle of her scrub brush in the water and touched it to the floor. Alma came over with a fresh pail of bleach water.
“Oh, just starting, I see. Well, when you’re ready for a clean rinse, here’s the water.” She sloshed it down on the wooden floor, spilling at least a third. “Looks like you’re a bit more timid than Iris was.” Jess turned around quickly, ending up with her fingers squished into something horridly slimy.

“What?”

Alma was already walking away. “Iris worked for us one summer. Loved the doves. Wasn’t afraid to get covered in farm dirt now and then.” Her voice trailed over her shoulder as she disappeared through the front door of the dovecot. It sounded like a dare, and an insensitive one, at that.

Jess closed her eyes for a minute and listened to the pigeon voices. If she was quiet long enough and didn’t think too many abstract thoughts, she could just melt into this sound and never come back. Maybe some of these birds – the oldest ones - remembered a taller and more confident Jess in work-stained old clothes who trained and fed and scrubbed inside of a younger dovecot.

Jess gritted her teeth and then dunked her entire scrub brush into the water and dragged it in concentric circles and arches across the floor.

After a while, Alma returned with a handful of the season’s first harvest of sweet peas. She plopped down in a chair next to the outside portion of the flight cage, motioning for Jess to do the same. The metal yard chairs were shining with mist and raindrops, but Jess obeyed. The flight cage beside them was borderline clean. Jess held her right arm a little bit away from her body, just in case, but otherwise seemed no worse off.

Alma told some stories of the heyday of the farm and insisted that Jess eat the sweet peas. It could have been a venture into an apology. They looked across the farm and into what Alma called the “high pastures” where the llama was ambling from the creek to the lean-to with arthritic slowness. After a while, some pigeons flew over the edge of the distant horizon with the open highlands at their back. Jess watched their approach.

“Are those yours?” They careened into the farmyard and then through a broken window that led to the uppermost part of the dovecot.

“Those are some of the homing pigeons.” Alma smiled.

“They don’t have a cage like the other ones?”

“No, no. They’re a bit...different.”

Behind Alma, the door to the dovecot opened and Ray walked out. “Saw the pigeons come in, did ya?”

“Yeah.” Jess turned back to Alma. “How are they different? I think there was something yellow tied to one of their legs!” She jumped up to try to see into the window, but the pigeons had vanished.
“That would be a flower,” said Alma. “A very good sort of greeting.” She glanced sideways at Ray.

“Homing pigeons carry messages between two places.” Jess was pleased to find that they key facts from this morning’s lecture had stuck. “What are you going to send back? Where’s their other home?”

“Questions, questions!” Alma twisted her hands in her lap.

“The other end of their flight is far out in the highlands.” Ray spoke slowly, deliberately. “We don’t send messages, they do. Our part is to send the pigeons back, alive and well, every morning.” He nodded. Jess started to ask something else, but for once, he stopped her question and abandoned a chance to talk about pigeons.

“And that’s all there is to know about them. So, Annalise says you come from Edinburgh?”

Jess nodded, but tried not go along with this obvious change of subject.

“And you live with your dad?”

Again Jess gave a reluctant nod.

“Tell us bit more, Jess. What’s he like? Why did he send you out here?” Alma settled back in her chair expectantly. Jess carefully tore a blade of grass into even pieces.

“Well...his name is Lawrence.” She kicked her heel into the mud under the eaves. “And he has brown hair and he works for a computer company. And he and Debbie - my stepmom - are on a three month long honeymoon in Italy.”

Ray and Alma both exclaimed at this and then began assembling all of their knowledge about Italy. Jess remained quiet and downcast. She didn’t care about Lawrence or Debbie and was remembering that she wasn’t supposed to care about Easterly either. But then, that was before she had known anything about the town or the highlands. As if on cue, a downpour sent them back into the dovecot.

“I guess there’s really not much more we can get done today.” Ray shut the door behind them. “If you want to put away the washtub and all, I’ll get the truck and give you a ride home. Can’t have you out in the moor in this weather.” He started back toward the cottage with Alma, who grabbed an umbrella from a stack of about seven by the door. Jess promised to hurry down to the driveway.

But after Alma’s voice was lost in the rain, she scrambled up a ladder to the far upper reaches of the dovecot and pushed open a trap door. Above her, she could see a lattice of rafters and fresh, clean wood shavings spread across the floor. Perched together on one of the rafters was a pair of brilliantly white doves. A yellow flower was still dangling from the leg of the one closest to her. The window was flung wide open, but the doves made no move to flee when they saw her. They stared down at her, composed and knowing. They didn’t even coo.
Ray’s truck, orange and brown with rust, bounced through the potholes on the road and sent gales of mud and rain flying in all directions. Jess held on to the edge of the seat so hard that her fingers were turning white. Ray must have been doing seventy while keeping up an impressive monotone about the garden that he and Alma grew despite the cold. But the truck squealed to a dead stop with surprising suddenness.

“Did you hear that?” Ray threw open his door and leapt out. Jess cautiously followed. They listened in the wind and rain. Then a distant gunshot permeated the highlands. Ray bit his lip. A second passed in silence, and then another, and then. An unearthly noise took root in the far off hills. It was a wail and a screech and every bit of aguish and fury that Jess had ever felt, and more. It sailed toward the truck and the two people standing on the rainy road. A knot formed in Jess’s stomach and the noise filled her head and tugged on her wrists like a physical being. She shrank into the muddy gravel.

The following quiet was so absolute that Jess assumed she had gone deaf. But gradually, she found that she could un-scrunch her eyelids one by one, then lift her head, then take a breath.

“Ray...what was...” She couldn’t finish. Ray took so long in responding that she thought he hadn’t heard.

“A foghorn.”

They climbed back into the truck. Ray looked shaken and drove even faster than before with a pale face and no talk. Jess didn’t have the energy to point out that he had obviously lied. She closed her eyes and tried to ward away waves of dizziness. Maybe they were close to the ocean after all.