

# Silent Ground

**Hilde Vandermeeren**

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Glasgow, 1983

When Ruby woke up in the middle of the night, the first thing she wondered was who had just tapped on the sash window. She sat up straight and looked out through the net curtains. The wooden shutters weren't closed, the rain was pelting against the glass, and the stormy wind was wildly shaking the beech tree in the back garden.

She threw back the covers, climbed down the ladder of the bunkbed, and saw the light of the full moon illuminating their bedroom. As she walked past the large mirror on the wall, for a moment, just for a moment, she thought it was Rosie standing there.

Ruby and Rosie. Rosie and Ruby.

How many times had Rosie had to show the birthmark on her left shoulder?

“This is Rosie, so the other one must be Ruby.”

“Last week they lost two milk teeth on the same day.”

“Really?”

Stupid talk. Stupid people. She'd just yanked so hard on her wobbly milk tooth that it came flying out, so she'd lost exactly the same number of teeth as Rosie.

She looked back at the bunkbed, where Rosie was asleep on the bottom mattress, and thought about waking up her sister, so they could watch the storm together. But in the end she decided not to. Rosie was probably still cross with her, and an angry Rosie was worse than the lightning that was splitting the sky.

Thunder cracked.

It was a huge shadow play of light and darkness. Maybe she should wake Rosie after all.

Light.

She gasped.

*There was someone standing beside the birch tree.*

Dark. Followed by another flash of light.

The shadow had disappeared.

Ruby rubbed her eyes and looked at the empty spot where she'd just seen a figure. It was raining even harder now and something was moving by the bushes at the bottom of the garden. She was about to call her mum and dad, but then she saw what it was: an empty plastic bag. The wind chased it across the grass and blew it into the hedge. It was a shame Rosie wasn't standing next to her, because then they could have laughed about it together.

She turned around, climbed the ladder, and dropped onto the bed.

A while later, she heard a different sound, not the shrieking of the wind.

*Like someone was fiddling with the sash window.*

She yawned, pulled the covers over her head, and fell asleep.

Later she was really, really sorry that she hadn't woken Rosie.

Everything comes to an end, thought Donald Cunningham. The minister was sitting in the rocking chair where his wife had waited for him almost every evening for forty years until she saw the light go out in the chapel up on the rocks. Their house was on the edge of Glendale, a village on Skye, Scotland's second-largest island, where the inhabitants were said to be as cold as the crags that surrounded them. Every night Aileen had prayed to God to light up the dark path along the cliffs so that her husband would come home safely. She had never been amused by Cunningham's reply that a good torch was sufficient.

Aileen.

Cunningham had seriously doubted his faith on two occasions in his life. The first time was when the gynaecologist had told them they'd never have children, Aileen's dearest wish. It had been Aileen who had finally helped him banish the bitterness from his heart.

"The people here in Glendale need you," she'd said. "And so do I."

The second time he'd suffered a crisis of faith she'd not been there to support him, as her untimely death had been the very cause of his doubt. If a God existed, why did He take the wrong people, he'd wondered. Ten years later he still had no answer.

His gaze slid over his hands and the spots that revealed his age. Maybe it's time for me to go, he thought, things have changed so much since the old days. He'd seen the chapel become emptier and emptier, and realized that people preferred to take their problems to all kinds of specialists in the city now, rather than calling on his help or God's. Except for Mrs Drummond, who came round once in a while with her granddaughter, Leslee, and brought him a homemade lemon meringue pie, he had little contact with the people of the parish these days. He'd seen the number of

gravestones in the churchyard grow, and by the end of his active career had buried many people who were younger than him. He was eighty-one now and on dark days like this he'd started to wonder if God was playing some kind of game with him.

As he looked out through the window and saw the mist rising from the sea, he imagined walking to the edge of the cliffs, where the waves crashed beneath him. There was no railing at that spot. His gaze moved on and lingered on the outline of the chapel, silhouetted against the dusk. Anyone who wanted to reach the chapel had to leave their car at a small parking spot and then take a winding path to the top. The ancient chapel was made from the same rocks it clung to, but the chapel was not indestructible. The wind and rain had left their mark, the generator needed replacing, the oak door was broken, the roof leaked, and vandals had sprayed the outside walls with signs he couldn't even decipher.

There's no place for me in this day and age, thought Cunningham, what business do I have being here? He closed his eyes and waited, but as usual no answer came. When he opened his eyes again, he saw it had started to rain.

The past few years hadn't all been bad, though. There had been some beautiful prayer services in the chapel and, without wanting to sound proud, he could say that he'd saved a handful of lives. Like Maura Maclean's, who hid in the chapel one winter's night and gave him the fright of his life when she suddenly appeared from behind the altar. She was fifteen, freezing cold, and pregnant. And terrified that her father – who was known as Boyd the Butcher, and not for his knowledge of fine meats – was going to murder her because of her condition. Cunningham had listened to Maura, taken her home with him, and discussed the situation with Aileen. Then the three of them had gone together to see Boyd. No one was murdered that night, nor in the days that followed. Over the years since her daughter's birth, Maura had sent the minister the occasional photograph of her daughter. When Cunningham saw the photos of Boyd the Butcher with his laughing granddaughter on his shoulders, he knew everything turned out well in the end.

Aileen regularly reminded him that was thanks to God, not because of his own personal contribution. He must never forget he was only an instrument. She said the same when he told her that he'd already prevented three people from throwing themselves off the cliffs and, when he mentioned his confession book, she said the idea had been sent to him by God.

Cunningham had his doubts.

The confession book that had been in the chapel for years had attracted people from far beyond Glendale. A lonely chapel on the cliffs was a good place to leave your sins behind anonymously, as Cunningham had repeatedly told the press in the past few weeks. It had been a regional journalist who had contacted him first. The journalist wanted to know if he was going to oppose the mayor's plans to have the chapel bricked up. The syringes that had been found there had apparently been the last straw. The journalist had asked him if he thought it was a shame that the confession book would no longer have a home. Cunningham had not reacted with spite, but had replied that the confession book would be sure to find a place elsewhere. There were still plenty of churches in Scotland where the roof didn't leak, he'd added. When a few politicians became involved in the discussion, the regional press were followed by the national papers and even a TV station. He'd agreed to every request for an interview. He hadn't done it for the attention, but because he wanted to find an answer to the question of whether his life on earth had been meaningful. A TV reporter had described him in her introduction as a symbol of traditions that were disappearing.

Cunningham didn't know whether to be happy about that, or whether it was, in fact, an answer to his existential question.

He looked outside again, where the chapel lay hidden in darkness. The work would begin in two days' time. Tomorrow Cunningham would go and fetch the confession book from the chapel. He'd told the press that people could continue to write in the book until the very last moment.

Suddenly he sat up straight.

There was light in the chapel.

Maybe it was just some local kids who wanted to have one last party. They liked places where no one would come looking for them. Or perhaps it's a late visitor, thought Cunningham, someone like Maura Maclean who wants to say a personal farewell to the chapel before it's too late. It could also be someone who felt the call of the sea. Maybe what he'd said in the press – about the people whose lives he'd saved when they were about to throw themselves from the cliffs – had actually given others the idea of coming here to end it all.

He hesitated. Aileen would say he was mad for taking the slippery path to the chapel at his age and in the dark.

But she wasn't there to stop him.

And he still had his torch.

Cunningham stood up, took off his slippers, and fetched his shoes. As he went into the hallway and pulled on his windcheater, he could hear Aileen grumbling at him.

"Yes, I'll wear my hat," he said.

He closed the door behind him, turned on the torch, and headed for the path.

The wind tugged at his cap, and he could hear the raging sea.

Halfway along the path, he stopped. This was too risky. His eyes weren't as sharp these days, and he'd almost taken a tumble over a rock. If he fell now, no one would find him.

Maybe this is a good place to die, he thought. Near the chapel and close to the house where he'd spent so many happy years, the home he'd soon be leaving behind for comfortable sheltered housing in the centre of Glendale.

He turned around and walked home.

An hour later, the light in the chapel was still there.

Later he didn't know what had made him decide to go up there after all. Slowly he climbed the path, his torch showing him the way. Just before the chapel, he stopped. The oak door was ajar. It had been like that for months, ever since someone had made off with the handle. He could hear the wind blasting through a broken window in the chapel. It was a sharp and high-pitched sound, like a warning.

He gave the door a push and, with a squeak, it opened.

His gaze swept over the pews, with initials and words carved into them that had no place in a chapel. The seats were all empty.

The confession book lay open on the altar at the front of the chapel.

All he felt was disappointment. There was no one to save, no one who needed him.

Now that he was here anyway, he might as well take the confession book with him. He couldn't bear the thought of the work beginning earlier than planned and the book being lost.

He walked over to the altar and picked up the confession book. It was heavy. But then it contained many sins. He'd made that joke to the press too. He ran his fingers over the black leather cover and the yellowing pages.

There were two new entries.

He couldn't make out the words on the left-hand page without his reading glasses. He leaned forward to see what was written in capital letters on the right:

I'M SORRY ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED TO ROSIE THOMPSON.

MAY GOD FORGIVE ME.