

The bleating said 'death'

A ship sailed alongside the cliffs. Alone in the little cabin, the skipper peered into the dense fog outside, trying to discern the foaming white from the white rock and the clouded white. He could not make out where the tall, overhanging cliff gave way to the sky, although he knew that it must be far above the little boat. He thought about the edge of the cliff, the sudden and unguarded end, where the green heather dived into the deep, and he was glad to be below and safe on board of his own boat. To be up there right now and not to be able to see the edge through the fog was a frightening thought. He shivered and took another large gulp of his coffee.

300 Feet above the skipper's head a young sheep was grazing the moist heather. The sheep, twitching her ears, felt uncomfortable about the fog, too. Chewing on a tasty mouthful of hogweed, she strolled back towards where the flock were grazing and cuddled up to a large, woolly ewe. The flock normally did not keep so close together, as they all preferred a patch of grass for themselves to comb for delicacies undisturbed. But it was absolutely necessary for all of them to be able to see, smell and hear the others and so they huddled more and more together as the fog closed in on them. The young sheep felt safe now she could smell every other sheep around her and hear the soft, soothing bleating of the sheep on the outside of the flock keeping watch. The air was still and all that could be heard was the bleating and the snapping of grass followed by chewing sounds. The flock slowly moved away from the patches of grass eaten short to new, unexplored grounds. The mother sheep she was resting against suddenly let out a sharp 'baa' and the lamb that had been venturing out on its own came quickly running back. Not long afterwards the young sheep noticed her own sister stray off too, but there was no one who would call after her, as their mother had died a few months ago. She thought about the smell of her mother, the softness of her wool and the taste of warm milk and yearned for the sense of love and safety that being with her had given her as a lamb. Then she braced herself and sauntered over to where her sister was grazing. It was not long before she became aware of feeling troubled about something. She stopped eating and stared into the fog to think about what could be wrong. Being lost in thought like this, she didn't notice her sister's straying off again. After a while, she decided it was a smell that made her uncomfortable, more specifically the smell of the sea. It was not that it smelled different from usual but it wasn't where it should be, too poignant and too close. She gazed into the distance, trying to discern the edge, but could not see anything a sheep's-length before her nose. Her whole body stiffened with fear and she stood motionless until a terrified scream came hurling through the fog, tearing those grey curtains of silence apart and releasing her muscles. Her heart and legs at a full gallop and panic reigning her mind, she hurled back to the flock and, seeing the other sheep in motion too, she ran with them. They ran all together in a whirl of terror and chaos and bleating that said: 'dog!' or 'pain!' or 'death!'. Then some sheep collided, another sheep fell behind and they all ran on. Then a lamb halted, its mother returned and they all ran on. Then the woolly ewe pushed her aside, she stumbled over a stone and stood still while they all ran on. The flock disappeared in the fog and the young sheep did not go after them but stood motionless and tried to think. Where were they going? And why again? There had been bleating that said 'dog!', but she had not smelled any. Other bleating had said 'pain!', but after careful examination she concluded there was no pain. And then there had been bleating about death. She remembered a scream, she remembered hearing it close to her. The memory of her sister straying away from her, just a short while ago, short before the screaming and the galloping. She felt terror creeping through her thoughts and tried not to think. She decided to go in search of her sister. Moving in the direction of the cliffs again, she encountered the lamb and its mother that had been left behind. They followed her

as she passed them by. Next they found the old brown ram, who was lying on his side with his foreleg stuck between two rocks. He was grinding his teeth as he tried to free himself. The young sheep stepped forward and carefully tried to roll the rock away. She leant against the other rock and put all her weight behind it, until finally it began shifting a little, just enough to let the ram wrest himself free. The brown ram stood up and went a few paces but could not hide a limp. The sheep waited to see if he would lead them on but he ram did not show any signs of doing so. She knew he was very old and that the failing of his eyesight had caused him a lot of inconvenience lately, so she bleated once and led the way in a slow pace. Four sheep were moving through the fog and she felt that a fifth was missing. They were approaching the cliffs again and her companions began to protest. She made them stop and soothed them by pressing her nose against theirs. Then she ran off into the fog. After a while she slowed down, fearing the presence of the edge. All her senses worked together to paint a picture of her surroundings. She could still smell panic in the air. She heard the sea waves crashing against the cliff, but not too close. She smelt sweet and bitter herbs, she heard her flock calling out after her and there also was the faintest hint of a familiar smell, bringing memories of soft wool and warm milk. She followed it through the moist grass and over hard rock and suddenly she stood on the edge. The roaring of the sea was louder here but still distant, separated from her only by the stone wall diving vertically into the deep. The trace stopped there. She wondered why she did not turn around and flee but could only stare. Deep sorrow had come over her and she did not feel the need to return to her flock anymore. She stood there for a long time without being aware of anything. The fog was clearing up and the sky was colouring light blue again when somebody tugged at her tail and tried to draw her backwards. It was the old brown ram, and after him stood the ewe and her lamb. The young sheep gave them a sad look but allowed herself to be drawn away from the edge. She brushed against the ram and buried her nose deep inside the warm wool of the mother sheep. When she looked up again, they were watching her inquiringly and she bleated once and led them on, in search of a green field with sunshine and shadow.

When the skipper drove home later that morning he noticed a flock of sheep grazing near the road and standing very closely together. They all looked up to watch the passing car and began bleating nervously. He attributed this behaviour to the anxious night they must have had in the fog, unable to see if danger were approaching. But at least they had each other. He loved being all by himself on the boat but there were times, when he was scared, that he would prefer to have people to talk to and share his concerns with. People, too, felt safe when they were many. His daughter and son were terrified of venturing alone into the woods at night but they were wild about the yearly Halloween ghost walk when everyone would try to scare everyone else to death in the shadows of the dark forest. A bit further down the road, he was almost home now, he saw four other sheep huddled together by the riverside. There were an old brown ram with large, curved horns, a slender mother sheep with lamb and a young black sheep with brown bands on her legs. The skipper wondered whether they made up an own flock or belonged to the sheep he had seen just yet. They seemed a bit lost. As he drove past, the young sheep looked up while the others kept eating peacefully. He nodded. Ten minutes later he was home and found his wife still sleeping soundly. He laid himself beside her and sighed contentedly.