

Writing *The Quality of Silence*

While I was writing *The Quality of Silence* I had various questions in my mind – for example, how does Ruby see the world? What does Ruby think of language? What is deafness like for her? For these questions the whole novel became a continual answer. Other questions demanded more left-brained, plot-type working out. I wanted Yasmin to hear Ruby's written voice out on the tundra in the middle of an arctic storm, how many miles to get them to that point and how quickly should the storm be closing in? It involved maps and a calculator, which I haven't needed in my other books! This 'scene' that I knew I wanted between them begged the fundamental question, how have they got there?

I knew that Yasmin was a loving and devoted mother. If someone had told her that she'd drive Ruby over the Atigun Pass with a psycho tanker driver on their tail and an arctic storm closing in, then she would never have embarked on the journey. How she gets to that point was to me an important part of the story and a way of delving deeper into her character.

From the beginning Yasmin has anxieties about bringing Ruby with her. She wishes that she'd left her at home in London, then wishes she could leave her in Fairbanks, but the town is violent, she knows no one, Silesian Stennet is menacing, and it's not as if she could phone Ruby to check that she's safe. At the same time Yasmin is convinced that Matt will die in the Arctic wilderness unless she reaches him quickly. She feels that she has no option but to take Ruby with her as she goes to rescue him.

It's not an easy decision nor is it something that stays static. She tells herself that if the journey becomes too dangerous she'll turn around and take Ruby back to Fairbanks. During the novel, this tipping point of danger takes on a physical presence for Yasmin, getting closer to her in the darkness. When she finally realizes it's too dangerous, she puts Ruby's safety before Matt's and tries to turn around. But the tanker driver won't let her. From then on the journey becomes increasingly perilous but it's too late to get Ruby to safety. She hates herself for endangering Ruby and sees only her irresponsibility, her passion for Matt blinding her, her fear of losing him

turning her into a coward. Perhaps Yasmin is partly culpable, but it was an unforeseen and terrible sequence of events that brought them to this point.

A more complex and to me more interesting answer is an internal conflict in Yasmin. Most obviously it is a conflict between her passionate love for Matt and her maternal love for Ruby, but just as important is the conflict between her rediscovered courage and her responsibility as a mother. During the story these two strong character traits compete with each other. She hasn't felt courage and passion since Ruby was born so she's never had to balance it with love and responsibility for a child. So at one level Yasmin's journey is a rediscovery of the self she used to be complicated by the fact that she is now a mother.

An early reader of my manuscript asked me if it was credible that Yasmin could drive a truck. To start with I wondered if he'd have asked me that question if the hero in the book was a big burly man driving a truck to get to his girlfriend. (I imagine him tattooed and muscular to engender confidence that he is able to do this man's work and possibly a waif-like damsel depending on him for her survival). I pointed out that it's not only men who drive trucks in Alaska and a female BBC comedian also drove the Dalton highway and although the conditions weren't as perilous, she still managed to crack jokes.

Yasmin has many advantages over muscles and tattoos. She is an astrophysicist because that was my gateway into her character, the first imaginative connection I had with her, but it also means she had a training in physics and so understands the laws of inertia, momentum, centrifugal force and kinetic friction. Her knowledge, which was once expressed as equations in a long-ago classroom, helps her survive the physical reality out on the ice. But alongside the theory I knew that she would need practical lessons and help.

From the moment Adeeb agrees to take them, she questions him about the truck and then studies him as he drives, not because she foresees taking over but because she finds it reassuring to see how he is controlling the vehicle and so keeping Ruby safe. When she drives the truck herself she puts her theoretical physics into use and remembers, mostly, what Adeeb did to handle this extreme road and vehicle. She quickly learns from her first mistake, while Coby and other truckers help her along the way.

Yasmin's character is also crucially important in why she is able to drive the truck. At the age of eleven she drove her drunk father home from her mother's grave through an intimidating part of London. It's that same courage and grit that enables her to drive the ice road.

While I enjoyed much of my research for *'The Quality of Silence'* there was one aspect of the novel that has left me with a profound sense of unease. Before beginning the story, I asked a hydrologist if it was plausible that a fracking accident could kill the inhabitants of a remote village. His reply was a startling, emphatic 'Yes' with no pause first. In the scenario in the story blowback from fracking is contaminated by arsenic (present in the fly ash used to backfill the well casings) that is then illegally dumped in a river. I discovered that at high concentrations arsenic travels as a tight plume. In the real case of the Duke Power spill, (which was not a fracking accident), arsenic showed up twenty miles downstream and that was in a wider, warmer river than the one in my novel. Unfortunately, it's not difficult to find examples of well casing failures and the dangers of fracking fluids to human health. I read articles on fracking from sources such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and *'The Concerned Health Professionals of New York'* website as well as advice from an expert hydrologist. In December 2014 New York State banned fracking. Just prior to that decision, the State of Alaska allowed fracking to go ahead across the state.

I have left Alaska itself till last because discovering more about this vast frozen wilderness was for me the joy of writing the book. My initial research was sitting at my desk in a cosy house in England and it's amazing how much you can find out from the internet. I tracked down people in Alaska, who generously emailed and telephoned back and I was suddenly in conversation with a wildlife expert who could most probably see Arctic hares outside his window and an Inupiat man who was unfailing patient and helpful. But there's nothing like seeing it – or in Alaska's case, feeling the arctic cold – for yourself.

I went in March so there was still some daylight but the temperature was punishingly cold. After a twenty-hour flight I arrived in Fairbanks. It felt like a frontier

town, the roads not gritted, an overturned car just left at the edge of the road. In my hotel there was a meeting of Inuit families and mushers gathering with their dogs for the start of the 1000 mile Iditarod race. My plan was to fly to the far north and I'd booked a place in a small plane. Just before we were due to leave a snowstorm blew in and all flights were grounded. I didn't have many days left in Alaska, and there was no sign that the snow would ease. Determined to get north I phoned taxi company after taxi company but unsurprisingly nobody would take me. Finally I managed to bribe a driver at a taxi company, who had a van, to take me as far north as possible. I would pay at least three times the normal hourly rate, plus some extra cash.

An hour later the van turned up. Like all the vehicles I'd seen in Alaska, it had a wire coming out of the grille to plug into an electrical outlet to prevent the engine freezing, but that was the only reassuring feature. It wasn't a four-wheel drive and from the looks of it, didn't even have winter tires. I got in and tried to fasten my seat belt before seeing it was broken.

As we drove out of Fairbanks Charlie, the driver, pointed out a graveyard and the above ground storage shed where dead bodies lay until the earth thawed enough for burial. It felt an inauspicious start. A couple of miles out of town, he pointed out the overturned wreck of a truck, which wouldn't be towed until Spring, telling me that most accidents happen on the way back to Fairbanks.

The road was snow-covered and icy, the gritting lorries hadn't been out, and it had no lights or markings. The tracks through the snow on our side of the road were deep, as trucks hauled their heavy cargos north. On the opposite side of the road, the tracks were far shallower. We passed abandoned gold-panning equipment, just left in the snow.

After half an hour, I saw a cluster of mail-boxes, about thirty of them. Charlie explained that the post came as far as here, so all cabin owners and homesteaders would come to collect their mail. The electricity also stopped here. Anyone living further north, lived off-grid.

A few miles later, we stopped at a truck stop and I chatted to a truck driver as he filled his massive truck with diesel. Although initially surprised at being ambushed by an English woman with a notebook, he took it in his stride. He answered my

questions about driving to the far north thoughtfully and candidly. 'Is it frightening?' I asked him. He paused a little while. 'Interesting,' he said. I asked him why it was interesting? 'Everything changes every thirty minutes,' he said and he smiled, and said nothing more. 'You find it beautiful?' I asked. He looked at me, still smiling, his voice slow. 'Yes, I find it beautiful.' He wasn't how I had imagined a trucker.

We left the truck stop, the snow falling more heavily. A little while later I understood why he found it beautiful. Trees, covered in snow, stretched as far as the eye could see. It made me think of going through the wardrobe door into Narnia. But it was a Narnia with a huge metal pipe running through it. Gleamingly metallic, the Trans-Alaska Pipeline was never far from view. I wanted to get out of the van and away from the road and pipeline. But the snow was getting heavier and the light was failing. We continued driving, the temperature falling. Charlie told me that the temperature often dropped to negative fifty. Somehow negative sounded worse than minus, or perhaps I was just concentrating on vocabulary to avoid thinking about just how cold that would be if we broke down.

On the side of the road there were small signs with an arrow pointing left or pointing right to keep you on the road. The signs popped in the gloom as the road narrowed and became more perilous. A truck thundered towards us, its headlights fuzzy through the darkness and falling snow. It was too dangerous to continue. As Charlie pulled the van off the road into a turning place our wheels got stuck in deep snow. He got out and tried to put chains on the tires. It took him two attempts but he managed it.

I was relieved but also disappointed when I saw the orange glow of Fairbanks. I felt I had seen but not experienced the beauty of northern Alaska. So the next day, I returned to the dovecote cluster of mailboxes and went along one of the trailheads to a place that offered the opportunity to go mushing. There was a simple cabin, with a generator that made enough electricity for a light, but nothing else, and fifteen kennels of excited huskies. I went out on a sledge pulled by a team of eight huskies over virgin unmarked snow. There was no road or pipeline or trucks. We went through a snow-capped forest, the only sound that of the dogs' breathing and the sledge bumping over the frozen ground. Snowflakes took their time to fall through the stillness and a moose moved soundlessly, a fleeting shadow through the

trees. I hoped, when I returned to England, I could capture a little of this place in my novel.