



Lights Over Sheel

By

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Opening Scenes



Everything that Michael Durham had ever wanted was embraced by the narrow, winding streets of Sheel. It was his refuge against a hostile universe and after nine months he was just another Englishman retreating from the twenty first century, accepted and invisible. He liked that and was grateful. A January wind driving up the loch blasted into his face as he jogged through the little town, its shops spilling their light onto the pavement. He pounded on along the shore road to Ardrossan House, a grey building of weathered stone standing in a ring of gnarled pines. His home.

“Daddy’s back!” squealed a voice as soon as he closed the door, and a small, blonde, curly haired bullet in new pyjamas shot down the hall to embrace his knees. Annie. Kat, her mother, was leaning against the kitchen door, a picture of the woman his four year old would become: tall, to his eyes very beautiful. “I have another commission,” she announced, her west coast American accent giving the words a sensuality that even after six years could still arouse him. His wife. He kissed her.

“Mrs Crow came to see mummy,” Annie chimed in beneath them.

“Don’t call her that. It’s Mrs Lauder,” said Kat trying to conceal a smile.

“But she looks like a crow.”

Kat explained: “Apart from trying to get me to join the knitting circle, whatever that is, she wants me to do a picture of the church.”

For Kat, commissions from the locals were rare. Most of her pictures were bought by tourists in the Agatestone Galleries. Last summer—their first in Sheel—she was shifting nine to twelve per week. The spare bedroom, converted to a studio, became a production line as Kat, knocked out a range of *Sunset Over Sheel* and *Dewey Morning* in Glen Gannoch till their tweeness nearly drove her insane. She was using the winter to stock up for the summer and had hopes that a gallery in Oban would take more pictures. This income was the only one they had for the moment.

“Oh, and Alec called,” added Kat.

“He’s been vandalised,” explained Annie.

“His excavations on the Barrow were messed up last night, and he needs a hand to clean up. I said we would.”

“Perhaps,” Michael said, “this might make him give up.”

They shared a boisterous tea, Annie climbing all over them and spilling food. Then after a few games he took his daughter up to bed. “Pat me, daddy,” she squealed, her code for rub my back and tell me stories.

Halfway up the stairs there was a round window through which he could see Jupiter now high over the Tennech Ridge. It was higher in the sky than he would have expected but before he could make sure a bank of cloud sweeping south occluded it.

Annie went to sleep quickly, satisfied with a short impromptu. When he came down Kat was reading in the kitchen illuminated by the red glow of the range, her legs curled up under her. My wife, he thought, gazing at her. She crossed the room and kissed him lightly on the nose, her hands digging for his crotch: her code for take me to bed and make mad, passionate love to me.

“Later,” he replied, feeling himself stir. He still had hours to do if he was to keep to schedule.

“Spoilsport,” she purred.

“Right, you bastard machine, switch yourself on,” he said, clattering down the cellar steps. A small black cube on the desk beeped back. On its top surface a multifaceted hemisphere of dark crystal began to glow, then send out beams across the cellar to an area just in front of the opposite wall where a gigantic image swirled into existence. There were no pixels here but liquid colours that poured themselves into the image of a computer screen with menus and icons flying through three dimensional space to take their allotted positions. Faintly through the shimmering image the polished bricks of the wall could be seen.

“Open Gallery Revenge, Gallery Work, Gallery Beyond All Knowledge, file FACTOR 1.” A flurry of galleries and files flew past him to the projected screen till a page came up, dense with typing, a cursor flashing in readiness. Michael stood for a second, collecting his thoughts, then began to dictate:

So great was FACTOR’s secrecy and the secrecy surrounding it, most federal agencies had no idea of its existence and the heads of those that knew, either by need or inadvertence, kept quiet out of fear.

Thus some of the greatest secrets of humanity and the universe were regreably hidden from all mankind...

As he continued, pacing up and down, dictating his past into prose, the sounds of the night—Kat padding her way to bed, seagulls far away—were banished from his senses.

When he finished near midnight he went into the back garden to look at the stars. Encircled by the crown of pines he could see the constellations of Orion, Taurus and Gemini, and between them the infinite vastness of space. Here wonderment lurked; in that emptiness he could sense the fullness of the universe, star upon star, galaxy upon galaxy until the numbers and distances numbed the mind. Reverently silent he went inside and locked up.

Upstairs his wife was waiting for him.

Fergus Bayne McNann sat in his chair, ninety two years old, gazing out of the window into the darkness. His speech having been stolen by a series of cerebral haemorrhages years ago, he sat in silence; only his hand moved, rhythmically patting the chair arm. A weaker individual would have died earlier, and gladly, but a lifetime of hard work and a visit to the kirk on a Sunday kept his skeletal body and brain alive. Wordlessly his mind travelled down the roads of his memory. He smelt his first Harvest Festival in long trousers where the onions were as big as footballs. He saw his pretty mother in her long skirts bobbing down the aisle. He remembered his first kiss with Helen as they walked by the loch. He recalled the day they were wed and the loveliness of her white body on their wedding night.

“You all right there, granddad?” A booming voice entered the room. “You want the lights on? Shall I close the curtains?” His grandson Alistair, he remembered. So like himself when he was young; tall, built of the rocks and mountains of the glens: a good farmer.

The old man grunted and shook his head.

“No?”

Grunt. He didn’t need light to see; everything was clear in his mind. Old Fergus’s eyes widened as he saw the lights over the loch again.

“I went down to the shops today. Everyone’s saying the storms are coming.” Alistair got no response. “I’m herding the cattle in this weekend in case the snow comes. And Thunderer’s already in the byre.”

Old Fergus remembered the summer nights fifty years ago when he used to go up to Brawn Benn to watch the sunset.

“I’ll put the kettle on,” said Alistair, leaving the room.

Out beyond his dark fields, out to sea, a bright star hung low. From above, a pure light, an unflickering star, streaked down to join it. It hovered, motionless, then bobbed upward.

The old man’s eyes took it in. The lights were dancing as they had in his youth. No one alive today had seen them; only he remembered. And now they had come again, tonight, and an old, suppressed terror surged through his fragile arteries.

Suddenly he was snapped to the present. The light was approaching, speeding toward him from out to sea, speeding toward the Benn, coming for him...

It paused, bobbing, twinkling, then shot upward out of sight.

Old Fergus grunted as vigorously as he could and staggered out of his chair for the pen and paper on the coffee table but fell in the effort, breaking his thigh on the brass fender around the fireplace. A pain more agonising than anything he had felt in his life surged through his body. He knew that this was the memory he was to die with: pain beyond all agony.

With the last of his determination he reached for the paper and pen, electric hell pouring through his thigh. Then with all the focussed concentration he could summon from his damaged brain he put words on paper. And he had no sooner scratched across the page when his body went rigid. Lights played before his eyes and all the scenes of his life fused into one white light as the thin blood burst from the arteries feeding his brain.

“Grandfather, grandad!” Alistair called out, entering the room, dropping the tea. But the only answer was the sigh of dying lungs as the dead body of Fergus Bayne McNann rolled on the floor thrusting out a piece of paper.

Alistair took the paper. He could barely make out the letters scrawled on it but they looked like two words:

MY D I A R Y

“Will you look at that!” snarled Alec Hammond-Gill pointing to the centre of the Barrow. “The little

bastards have ruined all my work!”

“No they haven’t Alec. It’s just scuffed up,” replied Kat looking around. Alec was not to be appeased. It was ten in the morning and he was pulling hard on a freshly lit cigar. His kilt blew in the wind and his heavy sheepskin jacket was making him sweat after he had climbed up the side of the Barrow.

Michael, Kat and Alec were standing on the rim of the Barrow looking down, having driven up to help their friend. The Barrow as it was known locally, lay in a field by the edge of the Forest above Sheel. From the main road it looked nothing more than a low hill but closer it revealed itself to be an elliptical—and uneven—earth wall over a hundred feet in diameter. It was not a real barrow, a burial mound common in the north west of Scotland. At the centre was a small mound around which, radiating out like spokes, were bare patches of earth where Alec had been digging. For three years he had been excavating at various sites within the hollow, covering them up for the winter with canvas or tarpaulin. Now these sheets—many torn—had all been ripped from their positions and strewn wildly about the ground. The grid of twine marking positions had been dragged into over the wall into the field.

“Months of work ruined,” growled Alec.

“Who did it, Alec?” shouted Michael. “Vandals? Serious looters?”

The archaeologist shrugged. “Most likely ignorant kids. They probably had some notion there was treasure buried on the site.”

“Possible, I suppose,” agreed Kat. “Or it could have been just plain old boredom. There’s sod all round here for kids to do. Or for me,” she added quietly for Michael’s benefit only.

“Is there buried treasure here?” asked Annie.

“No gold or doubloons, but valuable artefacts to me...if I find them,” he sighed.

So with Annie being more nuisance than help they gradually repositioned the tarpaulin covers one by one, anchoring them with stakes and stones. A full assessment of the damage would have to wait till after the cold weather, and possibly Easter when students would come over to gain field experience. As they worked, feeling their fingers grow ever more numb even the sun crawled up the sky. Marked by short days, winters in the highlands were bitter, and even at noon the sun was only barely over the Tennech Ridge on the southern side of Loch Sheel.

When he had banged in the last peg Alec announced there was hot soup in his but-and-ben.

While Kat and Annie hurried after the archeologist Michael lingered on the Barrow wall and looked out across the loch to see a small fishing boat come home with its nets. It had begun with nets when he was ten years old. His father had given him a nylon fishing net tacked on to the end of a bamboo cane to trawl the rock pools on holiday. He was bored with it after ten minutes. It was more interesting to read about the limpets and crabs or to study them in their tiny environment than to haul them out. Then he had looked closer at the net, seeing how thin strands of nylon connected its interstices. In every person’s life there is a moment when they cross the threshold to adulthood, though most never mark it. Michael did and knew he had entered a wider world. From that moment he had never stopped thinking about that net, how it was connected, how all things might be connected...

At the forest side of the Barrow Hammond-Gill had a small but-and-ben, once a shepherd’s hut but done up and well insulated. It was small inside but well appointed with two rooms, a kitchen-cum-lounge and a bed room; but it would take a chemical breakthrough to clear the smell of cigars. At first Alec had used it for his initial digs during the vacations but after he returned to Sheel it became his permanent home, and it was rumoured he rented out his house in Glasgow to fund his digging. Inside, Kat and Annie were obscured by streaming mugs of homemade oxtail soup.

From a line of books on a shelf above the front windows Alec pulled down a heavy volume. On the front in faded green and brown was a line drawing of hills and heather with the title *Legends of Loch and Glen*. He made a theatrical gesture of blowing off the dust – there was none but it made it mysterious to Annie. “And this is for you,” said Alec holding out the book to Annie. “It used to be my mother’s, then it was mine. It’s all about the legends and fairy stories of the highlands. Everybody knows the story of Robert the Bruce watching the spider - ”

“I don’t,” Annie said.

“Bedtime, story time,” said Michael. “I’ll tell you later.”

“Well there’s more interesting stories about kelpies and monsters in lochs and fairy brides in here. And a very special one about Sheel called *Amhas a Gleann*, the Man of the Glen, Sheel’s very special own monster – a great hairy beast that stalks the fields of Sheel. Ha, ha!”

Annie squealed with delight and dived in for the pictures.

“Don’t you think you would be better giving up the dig here?” said Kat when Michael came in. “It’s not like you’ve found anything, have you?”

The archaeologist shook his head. “Oh no - this place has fascinated me since I was a wee lad. And I didn’t take early retirement just to be put off by a gang of spotty kids. Once,” he self-indulgently mused, “to teach archaeology at a university was ambition enough for a boy from a no place town like Sheel. But ... after you’ve spent twenty years filling up shelves with important papers nobody reads you’ve an urge to get out and be another Schliemann. And discover Troy! This Barrow is my last chance and years are becoming valuable. The encircling wall was built for something. A neolithic settlement I suspect. And if it’s there I will damn well find it—”

“How deep do you think you’ll have to dig to find something?” wondered Michael.

“Three years here and I haven’t got deeper than three feet and some buttons from the early 1800s.” He went over to the door and re-lit his cigar. “You know old Fergus McNann died last night.”

“At the farmhouse you can see from the Barrow?” wondered Kat.

“Aye, its a great loss,” Alec continued. “He was ninety two and knew it all – the history of Sheel, aye and all the stories. He could have been a great help when I was writing my *History of Sheel* but I could get nothing from him. Ga-ga as hell these past ten years. This Barrow is on his land, or on his grandson’s land now, I suppose.”

Michael let his mind wander, putting in the occasional interjection when required, as Alec embarked on a saga of gossip and who was related to who. Since their arrival they had deliberately been reticent, easing themselves modestly into Sheel’s life. Had they remained completely divorced from the town it would have drawn greater attention to themselves and Alec Hammond-Gill was attracted to them instantly. Kat, charmed by his small eccentricities, thought he was rather lonely.

Finally they managed to drag themselves away from Alec’s monologue. “That’s virtually a half a day’s work wasted,” said Michael, pulling onto the main Sheel road. He was behind schedule but Annie was beaming as she clutched the book Hammond-Gill had given her.

A cold house made colder by death. In the front parlour, used only on Sunday, the old man lay in his cheap coffin, a focal point for his presence that still filled the house.

The undertakers had been prompt, acceding to Alistair’s wishes to lay the body out at home and let it lie there till the funeral. He wanted no sanitised chapel of rest, too much like a milking parlour, he thought. In his hand was the crumpled piece of paper containing Old Fergus’s last message. He had made a cursory search of his grandfather’s room. The diary wasn’t in the wardrobe or in the trunk under the bed where his grandfather stored his mementos: the buttonhole from his wedding, yellow and brittle; faded brown photographs of his grandmother and his father as a baby, a man he had never known. The drawers in an ancient bureau yielded nothing but receipts for patent animal cures. But the bottom drawer was locked. There was no sign of a key, so Alistair had brought up a knife from the kitchen and pushed it into the drawer against the lock. A quick kick had burst the drawer open.

Was his grandfather’s last message a death confession? Often upright men like Old Fergus, pillars of the community, were the ones who held the darkest secrets and he had half expected a leather-bound book to be lying in the drawer; instead there was only a small porcelain pot decorated in faded roses. Something had rattled inside. The lid lifted off to reveal a small metal object no longer than half his thumbnail. It was mostly a thin metal rod, not much thicker than wire, but unbendable with three discs at one end. The rod went through their centres and lifting it up to the light Alistair could see through the tiny gaps between them. The rod was reflective, of a dull sliver-grey colour while the three discs were matted with a rougher surface. If it was part of a machine then Alistair did not recognise it, though his immediate guess was a component of a clockwork mechanism. He would keep it safe in his desk.

Back in the front parlour, staring at the coffin, he tried to remember anything his grandfather might have said regarding either diaries or the past.

“Damn you,” muttered Alistair. “You’re dead and you’re still here.”

In the kitchen he could hear Jean moving about, sorting out the best crockery for the wake. He would have been content to remain in the front parlour but Jean reminded him he had to go to the Sheel Courier to put in a notice about the death.

The glen telegraph worked as efficiently on mouths and ears as did modern communications on electricity,

and Alistair wondered why he was bothering to pay for a notice at all. The receptionist at the Courier offered her condolences before he opened his mouth.

Afterwards he crossed over to the car park where a man was urinating against his Landrover. The man's greasy hair clung to a large skull that poked out of a trenchcoat that had come straight from the sewage works.

"Hey, Toochtie! Crap on my bonnet, why don't you!" Alistair shouted. The man snarled through a beard knotted with filth. "Piss off, you drunken bastard." Alistair didn't know whether to be angry or sorry. He was the last son—so they said—of a family who farmed the fields above Corrie, now rumoured to live in Sheel forest, sustained by a diet of scraps and turpentine.

He inclined his head to one side. "Lice," he growled, "lice!"

Alistair placed a couple of pound coins on the bonnet. "Get yourself some decent booze," he said, making sure there was enough distance between them.

Toochtie snarled, shuffled around Alistair, grabbed the money and stumbled off muttering, leaving Alistair to open the door with his handkerchief.

When he got back to the farm the local minister, Lauder, was waiting for him in the parlour fast asleep. Alistair coughed. It wasn't enough.

"Lauder!" he cried. "What are you doing sleeping on the job, man!" The minister started, burbling a gabble of incoherence then opened his eyes.

"Some fine respect this is," chastened Alistair, half amused.

Lauder quickly gathered his senses. "I'm awf'y sorry, Alistair."

"Forget it, man"

When Jean came in with a plate of scones he did his best to recover as they went on to discuss the arrangements for the funeral, what hymns his grandfather had wanted and where he would be buried. This was a foregone conclusion; everyone was interred in the kirk's cemetery where family plots went back to the seventeenth century.

"It's a shame though he cannot rest with his wife," observed Lauder. "I gather she was lost in the Loch."

"Then some one's been telling you the wrong story," replied Alistair. "She just up and vanished one day. But my grandfather didn't talk about it much. But then for the past ten years he couldn't talk about anything."

Later, after Jean had gone to bed, Alistair went to look out the front door. Under a frosty sky, the land his grandfather loved was covered in peaceful shadows. He saw a waxing half moon, high over the Tennech Ridge and behind it the pale stars. There was a faint scent of distant spring though not enough to give him hope; his farmer's second sense told him there was snow still to come.

Far out over the sea a shooting star streaked though the air then disappeared. Alistair wished upon it, at the same time telling himself he didn't believe such nonsense, but he would do anything for him and Jean to have a child.

After dinner Annie demanded her father read from the book Alec had given her. She was completely taken by the story of the *Wild Man of the Glen*, a man-beast with matted fur and teeth like needles. She squealed at the description of how its baleful red eyes would stare out between bushes then pounce on lonely walkers or shepherds and tear them limb from limb. It was the first time she was really scared – and she was enjoying it.

"I like it when the monster jumped out on the old woman," Annie beamed at her mother. "Was she a witch, daddy?"

"She might have been, pudding," said her daddy.

"Look at her screaming mummy, look." Annie drummed the picture. The drawing showed a thin woman cowering from a gnarled monster with angular, gangling arms.

"She looks terrified," said Kat. "Now bed, young lady."

While Kat put Annie to bed, Michael lowered the level of the wine bottle and went down to the cellar.

"Right, you bastard machine, switch yourself on," he said, clattering down the cellar steps. The computer beeped and the projector poured the interface into the air in front of him.

"Open Gallery Revenge, Gallery Work, Gallery Beyond All Knowledge, file FACTOR 1." Michael stood for a second, collecting his thoughts, then began to dictate:

Behind all the secrecy, hidden behind all veils was the absolute puppetmaster, and dominating presence of Harkley Symonder III who

was rumoured to have a Beyond Knowledge clearance of 30, which is twenty levels higher than the President of the United States. He succeeded Edward Hartington who set up FACTOR and who was rumoured to have a BK clearance higher than the Almighty himself.

In fact there were two post war occupants of the White House so intellectually challenged they were not even told..

Toochtie stood on Brawn Benn trying to make sense of the blurred image of the world. The dark blue had to be the sky because it was above him. He squinted one eye shut to stop the picture spinning. The moving grey masses must be clouds.

“Aye,” he mumbled to himself with a sense of triumph. To celebrate he took a swig—a swallow—from the can of drink-yourself-blind lager he’d bought with that farmer’s money and toppled backward into the cairn. Brawn Benn was not high, it was no more than a hill on the edge of Sheel forest, near the Back Way, looking down on the Manse and graveyard. But being on high ground already it commanded a wide view of the loch and the Tennech Ridge.

Farmer... in his rotting, drunken mind that carried a dull sense of regret. He needed another swallow to still the pain. He could remember the peat fires at his mother’s hearth and the smell of boiling mutton. His dad might have kicked him about a bit but life had a dynamic he could rely on. Then his ma went missing: gone, just like that. She walked out one morning and wasn’t seen in Sheel again. After that his father couldn’t cope and the drinking got worse, then one night he came across his father’s body dangling from a rafter in the barn. He sobbed and sagged further down the cairn till he was no more than a bundle of snoring shadows.

When his internal clock roused him for a swallow the moon had long since sunk. He shivered, dusted the frost from his beard and looked directly over the Tennech Ridge where a single star shone. “Lice,” he cursed, scratching himself. He took a swig for luck, a swig for courage then tottered down the path, tripping over the jagged stones.

“Lice,” he muttered.

Kat and Annie were toggled up for the morning. Kat’s green coat stood out against the white frost.

“Are we going to see Mrs Crow?” shouted Annie.

“Yes. No. Don’t call her that,” replied Kat. “We’re going to see about her painting and take some photographs of the church, or kirk.”

Michael watched them trudge up the garden to the stile onto the Back Way before starting work for the morning. This small path lead from Glen Gannoch to Sheel Town, past the Manse. In summer the hedges were hung with honeysuckle and fuschia, and glow-worms shimmered in the twilight; now it was a sheet of white for Annie to run on, brushing the branches to simulate miniature snowfalls.

By the time they reached the kirck Annie was dusted in frost and Kat was perspiring from keeping up with her. The kirck was an angular thing in grey and brown stone with the bell tower over the entrance in the middle of a crowded graveyard. They were approaching the gate when a droning wail hit their ears.

Annie looked up at Kat, eyes wide. “Bagpipes,” said Kat.

Over the brow of the hill came a strange procession. The pipe player, in full kilt and sporran, playing the *Lament of the Glens* though Kat didn’t know it, was followed by a tractor pulling a trailer on top of which was a coffin. For a moment the tractor lost its grip, skidding backwards but a rev-up regained its purchase. Behind it came a crowd of sombrelly dressed people all desperately trying not to slip on the ice. From a minibus with the legend *Corrie Care Home* on the side two nurses were unloading a wheelchair whose occupant looked no more than a hat on a pile of rugs.

“They couldn’t get the hearse up the brae to the farm for the ice,” said a voice. Mrs Lauder was standing by the arch. “Old Fergus wouldn’t have approved.”

The undertakers, joined by the tractor driver, hoisted the coffin onto their shoulders to begin a cautious, almost gingerly, progress into the kirk.

Annie nodded then asked: “What’s in the box, mummy?”

“An old gentleman who’s gone to the Lord,” intoned Mrs Lauder. Kat explained that she wanted to take

some pictures of the kirck, hoping it would make a dramatic painting. Mrs Lauder asked her to wait till after everyone had gone in, before heading over to the kirck herself.

On the other side of the cemetery Kat saw a red-faced, bearded man was brushing the frost away from the sides of an open grave. She pulled out a digital camera whose power and miniaturisation would not hit the shelves for another decade and began taking pictures.

Shivering in his pew Alistair could almost hear Jean's teeth chattering and the unspoken wish of the mourners for the service to finish before hypothermia carried half of them off for good. In the aisle, almost a skeleton with keen eyes, sat Hugh Macleod in his wheelchair. To his right was Billy Bride who was his grandfather's shepherd. He was in his seventies but vigorous still and at the back in a faded sheepskin was the archaeologist, looking sombre in his demonic beard.

Lauder, recollecting Old Fergus's life from the lectern, was pale and drawn: "Sheel mourns a legend of the town," he intoned, "Yet here in Sheel the virtues of his generation are not forgotten, nor will they be when there are still men like Fergus McNann."

After another hymn Alistair read out the 23rd psalm for no other reason than Jean thought it appropriate.

"I'm sorry, son. God's a load of bollocks but I thought I'd pay my respects," said Hammond-Gill, lighting up a cigar as soon as he was out of the kirck. Alistair and his wife were meeting the mourners by the door of the kirck as they left.

"Thanks for coming Alec," said Alistair, then with a little intensity, "How well did you know my grandfather?"

"When I was a wain, and when you were a toddler your grandfather used to show me around the farm and I helped out during the haymaking. He was always kind to me. It's a shame about his strokes – he could have helped me when I was writing my History of Sheel."

Alistair agreed and thanked him for coming then shook hands with Billy Bride.

"Billy, did my grandfather ever say anything to you about a diary?" He asked quietly.

Billy coughed. "He never mentioned anything to me. But then there was always a silence inside him," he elaborated. "There were twenty seven years between us - not over much when you get on, but I could feel it was there and it was sometimes a century." He sucked his gums in contemplation for a moment: "But perhaps," he added, "you should ask yon bag o' bones in the wheelchair. He's closer to Fergus's age. Though it looks like a sentence or two might be the end of him."

Dr Hugh Macleod, pushed by a nurse, was in his early eighties and had been Sheel's doctor for over forty years. As well as babies he had delivered calves and foals, and had a fund of country cures that would be frowned upon by the General Medical Council.

"Thank you for coming, Dr Macleod."

The chair-bound man's eyes flickered in recognition of his name. "It's the least I could do, Alistair, son."

The man's voice was weak and Alistair had to lean down. "You were my grandfather's friend. A good friend he used to say."

"Aye." There was a question in his eyes.

"Do you know if my grandfather kept a diary?"

The old man's eyes widened, stared above Alistair, as if the Grim Reaper had suddenly appeared for him. His hands began to tremble, his lips went white. "Ye mean to say he wrote it down?"

Alistair felt a shiver run up his back.

The old man's hands flailed in front of him, throwing off his rugs. He clutched his chest and groaned. All faces turned to him. He was rigid now, catatonically staring ahead as the nurse checked his pulse then darted over to the van to fetch her colleague. Swiftly they pushed him along the path to take him back to the home in Corrie immediately. Alistair offered to help but his presence seemed to agitate the old man further.

"What on earth did you say to him? asked Jean.

"Nothing ... nothing," said Alistair.

"Ye fair scared him," laughed Billy Bride. "We'll be back here next week for him, I'll bet."

"Why was that man in a pushchair?" piped a voice from the direction of their knees. Alistair looked down at a small girl peering up at him with razor, intelligent eyes. "I'm asking you a question."

"Aye," he answered gruffly.

"My, you're a pretty wee lassie," cooed Jean bending down to the child's height. "What's your name."

“Annie.” She was still staring at Alistair, expecting an answer.

Having no children of her own Jean was instantly drawn to other people’s, and like most childless people she thought she had a special affinity for children. “Would you like a sweetie?”

Annie shook her head. “Well?”

Alistair stumbled out a few indecisive grunts.

“It’s because he’s old and tired,” explained Jean. “And doesn’t have the strength to walk.”

“Annie, sweetpea, there you are!” her mother called from the gate. “It’s time to go.”

“You have a bonny daughter,” offered Jean. “Why not come up to the farm to see the horses.” Then to Annie: “You’d like that, wouldn’t you. You can feed them carrots.”

After a vague promise from Kat about going up in springtime they were just about to go through the gate when two men rushed past them, one in his twenties, the other middle aged.

“Where’s Alistair? said younger of the two.

“Donald! Sean! There’s no trouble is there?” The farmer came forward.

“Aye,” answered Sean doffing his cap to Mrs Lauder. “It’s Thunderer. He’s dead.”

“How?” Incredulity was splashed across Alistair’s face. “We just put him in the byre last night?”

“Not here, Alistair,” said Donald, taking Alistair’s arm and leading him between the headstones before he would continue: “Thing is, Alistair, he wasn’t in the byre. We found him at the top of the Long Acre by the edge of the forest.”

“I didn’t hear anything-”

“Alistair,” said Donald holding Alistair’s arm firmly. “The beast’s been butchered, hacked to death.”

As soon as his girls left Michael went down to the cellar to begin work. He lit the gas fire then roused the computer from its electronic slumber.

“Wake up, you evil bastard,” he growled. The Draco swiftly sprang to life with a recognisable series of clicks and the three galleries, PERSONAL, NET, and REVENGE resolved on the projection in front of him. “Open Revenge, open Work, open Beyond All Knowledge.” The screen flickered to present him with a series of icons representing files of work.

“Open D1.” The file sprung open, splashing type across the screen. Michael rubbed his eyes and began dictating. As his mind revved up through the gears of concentration time telescoped, the hours became minutes, the minutes seconds and the words came out in a torrent.

The Long Acre ran under southern side of Sheel Forest. In reality it was more than an acre, close to three, of thistle-infested field that Old Fergus had never tilled.

“I’m turning this over next spring,” said Alistair decisively. “The ground could do with some breath in it.” Alistair, Donald and Sean, stood with the length of the Acre before them, wrapped up against a wind that had risen quickly.

“It was Jed who really found it, Ali,” said Sean. “We were on the way to the Far Acre under the Benn to see to the fencing when he suddenly shied. I’ve seen some collies act daft but not Jed - he whined, then stood stock still. I reckoned he smelt something so I went to look.”

“And he didnae follow,” continued Donald. “He was terrified, you could tell. Barking like mad the closer we got to the wood.”

“I think he was drugged,” said Sean. “I mean, Alistair - they’ve got this drug which makes animals docile. So they gave him a shot and led him up here.”

“Hell of a drug then,” Alistair mumbled. Underfoot the grass, brittle with the frost, snapped audibly as they approached the forest. The clarity of the late morning light emphasised the cold and the silence when they stood still.

“He’s up there, Ali.”

The bull was lying on his back with three legs thrust upwards. The fourth was missing at the hip. The body was covered in frost, glistening, driving home the unnatural callousness of it. Thunderer’s eyes were wide open, or would have been if they were still in their sockets. The eyelids had been pulled back and like dry flaps of skin lay against the forehead. The white bone of the sockets stared back at them. Further down a neat oval

hole had been cut deep into the body. Its edges were clean with no sign of hacking and the exposed internal organs were equally neatly sheared. The heart was missing together with a mass of surrounding lung tissue; all the connecting arteries and veins looked as if they had been melted. Alistair pointed to the back legs. The pizzle had been cleanly excised, along with a wide patch of skin on either side leading up to where the testicles should have been. Not only had the bull been castrated but the entire genital region going deep into the pelvis had been removed. Cartilage glinted under the sun.

Alistair was shaking. "Bloody hell. How have they done that? Bloody fucking hell."

"Why have they done it?" muttered Donald.

"It's a satanic ritual that's what," said Sean. "I bet they ate his balls."

"Shut up, boy," said Alistair. Whoever had ripped into the animal's flesh had ripped as certainly into his own. He wasn't being sentimental over a young calf he remembered fondly feeding, he was pained at the aberrance of it: Old Fergus passing on was natural, as was slaughtering a bullock for meat; but this was an indecent act against the land he worked. He stood up slowly, pulled his collar tight and slowly walked away, putting distance between him and his farmhands.

There were rumours of cattle mutilators who travelled through England and the borders but they had never been heard of so far north. Nor from what he recalled did the perverts ever mutilate so extremely and only rarely did they kill. There's one sick bastard out there, thought Alistair, and I'm going to blow his balls off. He said as much to Jean.

"No you're not Alistair McNann. You'll be on to that phone for the police now. Sergeant Fraser will have to be told if you want the insurance. Also you have to tell them so they can begin watching, at least. So they can warn the other farms."

As far as the police knew Alistair's bull was the only one and it was coming on to dusk when sergeant Fraser pulled up outside the farm. With him was a stranger who he introduced as Mr Grainger from DEFRA, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, a branch of the government that plagued Alistair with bureaucracy and stupidity.

The sergeant took a torch from his car and had Alistair lead them through the farmyard to the Long Acre.

"Is that the barn it was locked in?" asked the ministry man pointing to a long low building on the opposite side of the farmyard.

"Byre," corrected Alistair. "And not locked in. Never any point."

"And you heard nothing, Alistair?" asked sergeant Fraser.

"Nothing."

"You didn't see anything?" asked the ministry man.

"I was asleep."

Long beams from the torches played over the dark frosty field as they walked up to the bull's body. In the darkness with the black mass of the forest ahead, the bull's mutilated carcass stood out in greater relief than earlier in the day.

Fraser was about to examine the remains when the ministry man held out his hand for the sergeant's torch. Taking it he inspected the body, looking closely at all of the wounds, then returned the torch without saying a word.

"Look at that." Fraser waggled the torch beam across the edge of the hole that had once been the animal's rectum. "Whatever blade did that was some sharp knife. They're the cleanest cuts I have ever seen. Look - no ragged skin."

"Bring the torch back," asked the ministry man, taking out a small specimen bag from his jacket and a pair of scissors. After another close inspection he cut away some of the hide and flesh near the rectum and put them in the bag. He barely grunted a thank you.

"Have you noticed, Alistair," said Fraser, as the ministry man was walking about the site, looking on the ground, "that there is no blood on the ground around the bull. It looks sucked it dry."

Alistair's mind fogged, his stomach knotted tight. "Are ye saying it's Devil worshippers then?"

Fraser shrugged. "Maybe - I'll do some digging."

Alistair had read about their orgies of blood and sacrifice under the moon in the lurid Sunday papers, and now they were in Sheel, his land. Devil worshippers, Satanists - as he looked around into the shadows of the Forest he could imagine them hiding between the trees

Alistair and Fraser walked back to the farmhouse both silent, each pondering the depravity while the ministry man some yards ahead was chattering into his mobile phone. When he finished he turned briefly to address them then turned back again so Alistair could not see his face.

“I’ll see to it the Sergeant here fills in all the correct forms so you can realise the insurance on the beast if you had any,” he said, his words vanishing into the air so that Alistair and the policeman had to catch him up. “But DEFRA would be very grateful if you could bury the beast as soon as possible, or we could arrange to take it away—”

“No, no – I’ll do it. My grandfather wouldn’t have wanted anything else.”

“And we would also be very grateful –” here the ministry man turned to face Alistair full on, “if you would not tell anyone, and especially do not go to the papers, or speak about it casually.”

“With my farm hands? It’ll be all round the loch.”

“Then manage folk’s imaginations. Tell them to tone it down, tell tem on pain of their jobs to tone it down. In fact tell them to keep quiet about it.” Then without further words he marched straight up to the police car, got in and waited for sergeant Fraser.

Later, alone in his grandfather’s front room after Jean had gone to bed Alistair still felt numbed by the day’s events – his grandfather’s burial and the death of his bull. Unsettled and nagged he left the bills for animal feed, forms for set-aside, and took a look out into the farmyard with Jed sniffing at his heels.

The icy wind from the sea blasted into his face as isolated clouds tore across a clear sky.

In the Mitsubishi her father had bought her Flora MacDonald peeped her horn when her headlights picked out a kilted man walking in the road. He jumped onto the kerb with a wave. He was standing outside the drive to Ardrossan House. In the short time she had been back in Sheel she had noted how the new owners of Ardrossan House had made very few friends apart from Alec and her mother, and this was mostly business since the American supplied her mother’s shop with a stream of awful pictures for the tourists.

Flora MacDonald both liked and hated her name. MacDonald was euphonious, proudly Scottish, while Flora, conjured contrasting pastoral images; and when run together the syllables danced prettily off the tongue. She hated her name because all through school the Skye Boat Song, *Speed bonny boat, like a bird on the wing*, had haunted her. It was also the name of a margarine and when going out with the family it didn’t help that her mad mother had christened her little sister Skye.

Later at her sixth form college where she had studied the sciences, her name was always a conversation opener when meeting boys, and their response to it was always a good indication of their suitability.

But there were no boys in Sheel, not now, not of her own age that were remotely interesting. Most could barely spell their own names, and Donald, her ex, had returned home for the Christmas holidays from university with a raggedy thing in holey jeans and red hair.

Fate was punishing her for a gap year gone wrong. Before going to university, she had decided on a year island hopping in the Far East to Australia with Sylvie. Sylvie had done the right thing: let the gap year be just that and had come home in time to go to her university. Flora had fallen in love with a cute beach Blonde, which turned her gap year in to a gap eighteen months. Inevitably the blonde had junked her and now God in his infinite cruelty was forcing her to live in Sheel till September when the next academic year began.

Her mother was driving her mad. She ran the Agatestone Gift Shop with a scatty energy and a carousel of New Age enthusiasms that defied logic and science, while her little sister bleated at her heels for attention and games. The longer she stayed there the more she could understand why her father had left. She would live with him only his current home was an oilrig within whistling distance of Norway.

The only island of sanity in all this was her grandmother who lived in a little cottage on the outskirts of Invergable on the High Moors, a softly spoken old lady with silver hair. She would stay with her gran for a few hours then come back and see if Ricky C with the GSOH had emailed her.

When the car reached the head of Glen Gannoch the road s zig-zagged up to the High Moors where snow was still lying, and in places lying deeply. Flora switched to four-wheel drive and drove on noticing, as the car dipped into a hollow, a bright light streak across the sky somewhere over the Tennech Ridge.