

2nd prize, Prose

Highlander

Max Munday

Max is a member of the Orion MC in Glasgow, but lives in West Wales on the edge of the Black Mountains.

In his first Harvard semester one of the elderly law professors had spoken often on problems of establishing blame in civil cases. In the hush of the chauffeured car heading north on an October morning from Glasgow, he reflected on who precisely was to blame for an interrupted business trip and a journey to the middle of nowhere.

Crosshairs focused in on the 'little' sister, but Sean Connery might be considered an accessory. Cassie always had a thing about Scotland and mountains. She was led on in this by a doting grandfather. Actually Grandad was a good Boston businessman, but able to quote chapter and verse on how the old family were forced off the land during the clearances. The account was aided by a few heirlooms dating from the dispossessed; not least a scratchy account in an old diary of life on the hillside that found its way into the local museum. He had actually visited the old village during the war, and urged Cassie to try and go see when she was older. A few dated yellowing Kodaks revealed a few old houses, an austere looking hill, and a lot of grey water. A deep foundation of blame here he thought. Objectively he thought the family had done well to get away from all this. Ontario initially in the 1850s, then a wealthy drift towards New England.

Scotland became an obsession with Cassie, school projects, that dreadful *Highlander* film with Sean Connery that they had watched again and again, and then the doom laden trip of 1988. It was his final year at college and a decent job in Boston was waiting for him. Plans for a few weeks sailing near Providence with well-heeled Harvard pals were quickly dashed by a phone call from Dad. He was advised in short order that: Cassie had been promised a trip to Scotland at 18; Dad was 'unavailable' being tied up in another corporate takeover bringing misery to thousands; "no she was not going alone"; "yes it was only a few weeks"; and a less than 'gentle' reminder of who was bankrolling college and who had made noises to get him the upcoming job. It was the least he could do apparently.

Looking back, that 1988 trip is a bit of a blur. The weather then was a blur too. His car had now reached Fort William and he has a vague memory of this place back then. Quite a bit bigger now, and he could not remember seeing the tops of so many hills that summer. On the positive he and Cassie on the 1988 trip had not had to rough it in campsites and youth hostels. This had been a blessing given the persistent fuzzy combination of summer rain and midges. Cassie went out one day with some other hotel guests and got half way up Ben Nevis while he had stewed in a loch-side bar. Regrettably, the experience of becoming saturated, filthy and cold had left her undimmed. Then there was a trip up Loch Ness - a cold sliver, a night in Inverness, then a rickety train with nothing visible from steamed windows. The end of the line: more grey mountain vistas, and a lucky lift in the rain shoved us towards the old village and homestead. A line of low houses, bedraggled sheep, and that same austere hill from the photos - a notable Munro, according to a local, who engaged Cassie in conversation at the bar. Yes Prince Charlie had been through here. France for this! She had been much taken by it all, while he remembered being anxious to return to the fleshpots of London. She

had ventured on to the hill, wandered the coastline, pebbles, shells, rifled a little library of local books in the hotel.

Google Maps tells him they have reached Invergarry. Not far now (72 minutes precisely), but at least the weather is better this time. The car hurries on, being released from virtual deadlock on the Inverness road. The sullen driver advises that it will be tight to get back in time for the last flight to Gatwick.

The thirty years since that trip had glided away. Cassie married, never needed to work, kids, but always interested in the Scotland thing – their shared heritage and all. A trip every few years with her longsuffering husband and kids who didn't get the Scotland thing either. Up and down a few hills although poor Cassie was never the fittest but always keen. Secretary of a Scottish society back home and she virtually singlehanded ran their Highland Games annually. For him, a good start in a legal career, partnership, a chance 1998 meeting in a Boston bar with two loopy MIT grads, an equity stake in their tech business; now described as a high net worth individual regularly tagged in the financial press. The usual cost: two marriages, an ulcer, a drink problem just about under control, two kids seen rarely and prolonged bouts of being alone. He ponders on a highly successful empty life as the car descends in the sharp autumn light towards the west. The driver really is ramping up the miles now, but progress slows as a left turn takes them on a narrow road towards the village.

Cassie had spotted a plea from a community trust or some such to purchase a tract of land, this being a site of special nature or whatever, making sure it was not purchased and forested, or put to various commercial usages - many millions required etc. Yes - his sister had explained - this covered the area of their genesis including the grey slab of a hill. Cassie, enthralled, persuaded her long suffering husband to make a sizeable contribution, a micro dent in his 'net worth' but no doubt a decent boon for the trust. Indeed, sizeable enough for Cassie to get an invite by the trust. They had not quite got the money needed, but had raised enough to purchase a small portion of the tract...would she like to come to the opening of a small visitor centre in the village? Of course she would!

But a call had come to him three weeks back. Poor Cassie. Desperate to make the trip, but the surgery and aftercare, and the horrified face of the surgeon when she advanced the notion of a journey of thousands of miles to the back of beyond. Did she not want to see her kids again!? In scenes reminiscent of thirty years past, another phone call from Dad: "Look it means a lot to her" [always the favoured one]. "She has always been there for you. I can't go as I'm too old. It would be nice for you to represent her, get some photos. You are not doing anything else are you!?" But the visit to the hospital sealed his fate. The expression lighting up when she spoke about it. So proud to be helping out. So, he thought, here on an October afternoon, thousands of miles from home, no phone connection now, and losing money for every hour spent in the car. The looming hill means you have reached your destination. A curse on little sisters! Cassie is to blame then.

The weather is good today, no midges on the way to the hall – biscuit tin weather and even the sheep look cleaner. Much hand shaking and thanks to benefactors (little sister, not him of course), a historical talk, and then some 'interpretation' of sites around the village. Tea, whiskies all round that he has to carefully avoid at all costs now. Islands with hills sharpen on the western horizon as the afternoon plays out. Gatwick is not going to happen. It is too late now to get the last Glasgow flight. In spite of the little hotel being booked up a room is made available for him. The driver, tipped heavily for the inconvenience, is more than happy to bed down in the car, and wobbles off to the bar.

It is only about four in the afternoon. Yes if you want to make a call you get a pretty good signal about 200 yards up the road. The internet is not too clever either apparently. He walks out of the village towards the area of their Highland genesis. It is quite warm for October. The phone call is forgotten as a stile gives access to the remains of a few old farm buildings, and then a crudely made sign 'hill access'. Coming off the demon drink, and a weekly session in the gym, has left him a little more fit. The path is dry and drained; he is still in jacket and tie, and the shoes will probably need replacing after 10 minutes of this. But perhaps just follow the path for half an hour to build appetite. The imposing grey mass from the old Kodaks is unrecognisable in the early evening light. So many colours, so different from New England in the Fall. A slightly steeper section gives views to other islands soon to be joined by a rapidly descending sun. Perhaps another 20 minutes then. He reaches a small jumble of sit-size boulders on a flat bit of the climb. He 'remembers' he has forgotten about work for a few hours. The sun is half eaten by another island. It should be alright to get back since the path is clear, and there's always the torch on the phone. This is different from 30 years ago. Peace. Quiet. A sigh in the death of the day. He could sit long here but the final ruby of light disappears.

He has missed dinner. The apologetic host arranges some sandwiches and he sits in the bar window staring around. A few of the folks from the afternoon event are in good spirits at the bar and come over to talk over the day. He listens to their excited plans for the small tract they have taken into trust. It is such a small dent after all. He calmly asks: "How much would you need to purchase the whole of the estate?"