



Mountain Writing Competition 2024

3rd Prize: Prose

One Yellow Balloon, by Allan Bolton

Sophie was nine when she, her mum and dad joined her grandfather Colin setting out that sunny Sunday morning for Meall na Teanga. Colin had held it back for a suitably accessible final, celebratory, Munro.

Sophie's mum embarrassed Colin by fussing every dog they met and telling their owners, 'My Dad's just completed all the Munros!' which risked, and a few times elicited, the flat response, 'Oh aye.'

That was last year. Now Sophie was concerned: 'What's Grandpa going to do now?' She'd asked the man himself, but his unfocussed, anxious look reflected back to her. Her imagination had been ignited by Colin's stories from his twenty years exploring the highest Scottish hills: how, on descending his first Munro, Buachaille Etive Mor, he accidentally dislodged stones which bounced down uncomfortably close to walkers in the Lairig Gartain; in winter, a sudden gust ripped the map from his hand and sent it skittering over hard snow into the depths of an unreachable glen; sliding down steep snow, he trapped one bent leg under his body far from help on Mam Sodhail; he left a lunch stop on the South Glen Shiel ridge -- which twisted at that point -- and walked half a mile before realising that he was returning the way he'd come.

Not all Grandpa Colin's stories were near-disasters: hearing a local say, 'Good luck with your long walk', he trekked ten miles to Ben Starav and gazed down on the cruiser plying Loch Etive three thousand feet below; clambered above rainclouds to find newly fallen powder snow glittering from Gleouraich to Spidean Mialach; was blown to the ground a thousand feet below the top of Braeriach, almost into the Lairig Ghru; balanced along the narrow ridge from Ben More Assynt to its South top; marvelled at the six ridges of his favourite mountain Sgurr nan Ceathreamhnan; felt wonderful terrors on Skye -- the narrowest route between Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh to Mhadaidh with fingertips shredded by the gabbro rock, near-dangled from the Inaccessible Pinnacle, or rode gravity on a conveyor belt of white rocks down the Great Stone Chute.

To Sophie, these tales were better than fairy stories. She would glory too in images of gentler beauties: on a humble Geal Charn seemingly alone with mist and rain, yet approached by a figure strangely backlit by a brief shaft of weak sunshine; resting on Mayar, sharing the top with a lolloping arctic hare; powerful May sunshine transforming snow into tinkling meltwater or evaporating dew into steam on Ben Klibreck; resting on long descents at crag-backed lochans where enclosed glens amplify the soothing sound of gently-flowing burns; excited to see brown hares, deer, eagles and ptarmigan.

Colin did not conceal the tougher aspects: navigating through thick mist to locate a summit, then knowing the importance of finding a safe way off; judging whether winds were too severe to

continue; accepting that the fourth peak in a group might have to wait for another day; when alone, being that much more cautious.

He took early retirement from work and so had time to speed up his Munro visiting (he never saw it as 'bagging').

Then Colin fell silent. 'I don't hear from Grandpa any more. Is he all right?' asked Sophie at home. No-one knew for sure, but Sophie overheard her parents talking: 'He hasn't enough friends his own age. He needs a new interest.' 'Yes, but mountain walks is what he knows best. He should find a new challenge or at least a relaxing interest.' 'Nothing compares with the Munros in his mind.' 'He's done a few Corbetts. He could start collecting those. Or he could walk the Great Trails and avoid the foul weather on the highest tops.' 'Yes, all of that would be good. But we can't decide for him. I worry that he'll give up on his interests and get lonely doing nothing much.'

Sophie's birthday was coming up -- a special one because it was the first with a round number, a whole decade to be celebrated. Her mum encouraged the idea of a party: Ellie, Sophie's best friend, kept saying how excited she was about it. Sophie was happy to go with the flow: 'Yes I'd like one more proper birthday party, even though it seems a bit childish now. Ellie's going to organise the games.'

The venue was MacBurgers, by popular acclaim, although Sophie's parents winced a little at the prospect. 'Granda will be there, won't he?' 'Not this time, darling. We've just heard from him. He's having a little holiday in the Highlands but he's thinking of you.'

Without warning anyone, Colin had planned to walk the West Highland Way, not because he was keen to do so for its own sake; proper mountaineers often looked down, in every sense, on the popularity of the trek. It would give him time to re-assess his feelings and options while in company with some of his most memorable mountains.

Ellie's enthusiasm helped make the party games enjoyable, even finding ways to involve two awkward little boys in the fun. The Happy Meal was a predictable success. Thanks to Ellie, there was no screaming, running or throwing. The manager was so pleased that he knelt in front of Sophie and presented her with a bouncing bright yellow balloon with a streamer attached. In red letters it displayed the MacBurgers logo alongside a Happy Birthday message.

At the car, her mum noticed something missing: 'Sophie, where's your balloon?' 'I let it go.' 'You mean it slipped out of your hand?' 'No. I meant it to fly away.' 'Why?' 'I sent it to Grandpa. I don't want him to give up. It'd make me sad to think there'd be no more adventure stories.'

Her mum explained that there was no way of knowing where the balloon would go, perhaps blown somewhere far away, or found by another little girl on a beach in another country, or into outer space.

Colin leaves the Kingshouse Hotel and sets about the Devil's Staircase, regarded with awe by walkers on the Way. But surely the most benign of his Satanic Majesty's locations in Scotland! He steps aside to admire the view of Buachaille Etive Mor. Overnight rain has drenched its black slabs and now the morning sun raises a bright mist from the dripping runnels.

He feels re-connected: several possibilities are within reach. He thinks of his friend John, the 'line-bagger' who began a second round of the Munros, choosing alternative routes of ascent. Perhaps not that, but he would explore hills and long tracks whenever and wherever he could.

Colin steps off the trail on to a green hillside to gain a better view, noticing a small pile of stones warning stray walkers of a deep drop into Glencoe. Something's showing up on the stones. Could it be a checkpoint from an orienteering event? Bending over it, he sees that it's a balloon, discordantly yellow, half-deflated and bouncing gently, held in place by something -- a bloody streamer! To think that someone would be careless and selfish enough to litter this wild place with fast-food rubbish! Perhaps that someone tried to launch it in hopes that it would fly to the great herdsman of Etive opposite. But no, recent winds have been persistently southerly.

Being a responsible person, Colin zips the now-wrinkling balloon into his rucksack. Later he checks MacBurgers' website; the nearest outlet is eighty miles away in Glasgow. He knows that the balloon could have flown from any number of Happy Places.

On his phone is a message, from Sophie: 'Grandpa, I sent you a balloon from my party. I was sad that you weren't there. Now I'm ten, can we have an adventure, just the two of us? xx' As for the balloon, it could have been The One. Colin would never throw it away; he'd keep it zipped in the lid of his sack, just in case.