

## Bothy

By Vera Fletcher

We pull in to the side of the road in the last of the winter light, reversing the car back until we are wedged up tight against a lone boulder; a small slice of shelter in a desolate landscape. The car transforming into a silver stone set in the shadow, calved from the boulder like a Russian doll. *Leave enough room for the tractor* he says gesturing to the four wheel drive track churned into the grass up ahead. But it is hard to imagine the track gets a lot of use. The landscape is wild and fierce like a beast. What can a tractor do but superficial change? It'd be like trimming a tiger's whiskers. A tiger is still a tiger; just ask Siegfried and Roy.

He's in a rush as usual, no bloody patience, everything fast. He only has one speed, at least until the wall hits - which it always does eventually, but not until he has inhaled every last breath out of the landscape. It will take a back seat, patiently pursuing him back to the city before it blocks him in. Sometimes on his return he disappears for days, delirious from the dehydration which supersedes a thirst for adventure. But there is no time for that now, he barks orders and takes off down the track like an animal that's caught a scent.

I struggle to keep up, laden with my load cast haphazardly upon my back. The straps need adjusting but one of them is jammed and I can't free it. The result is defeat and a pronounced gait as I traipse slowly up the track, my vision propelled earthward like an old woman worn before her years. The path as promised is flat. Unusually I walk without pause, more for fear of sinking, being swallowed up by the boggy earth than from any buoyant enthusiasm. Deceptively the water is covered in grass – *a wolf in sheep's clothing*. Still I dare not complain, comparatively light and nimble, he is the packhorse carrying the wood and coal – on his back and clutched against his chest.

We reach the bothy within an hour. *It gets cold out here* he says dumping the fuel in the main room and setting to work on the fire. I take a look around, not mentioning my feet are wet. The icy river crossing had been the catch –

nothing is ever as easy as it looks. We get drunk by the fire on cheap red wine as I dry my feet; his having managed to walk on water. He speaks in slurred fondness of adventures from the past – mountain days and bothy nights, the wilderness of youth. Not quite the wildness of mine and I wonder where my time had been spent. Most of my qualifying memories start with him.

After breakfast we set off for the hill. *Just a wee, easy one* he says and I don't believe him. I never find any of them easy. We leave the bags in the bothy and he puts a small day bag on his shoulders. Panting and wheezing, I heave myself slowly upward. Complaining and devoid of grace, I long for a path as I persevere knee-deep in heather up the steep terrain. My bottom lip quivers and I cry a little, like a baby – frustrated after hours of walking rather than from any tangible pain. The sun rises over the ridge, hues of gold, amber and burgundy burn into my eyes. My feet loll around in my hand-me-down boots. *Come on, my little mountain goat* a voice calls from above. When I raise my hand to my brow I can just make out his silhouette on the ridge - a small black figure piercing the bright white light.

We reach the summit after three false ones; a hill with a morose sense of humour. But the cairn tells us now we're undeniably at the top. I stand with him and we breathe in the view in thirsty gulps; snow-capped peaks rising up in every direction. I set myself down at the base of the pile of stones and look back on where we have come.

I walk back to the bothy alone, carefully negotiating the steep decline. He's gone ahead on well-oiled knees unaffected by the rigours of the journey to the summit; always in a hurry, eye on the horizon. I savour the view silently without the distraction of my laboured lungs. Deer stand defiantly on the moor. Sun shines through the birch trees and skips across the water. Smoke begins to rise out the old chimney in the distance.

Back at the bothy the fire is roaring. He is sat nursing a dram, head buried in a book. I take off my boots and sit down by the fire, pegging up my socks. He bounces back the smile now beaming from my lips. Outside the winter light

dances and fades unnoticed as we retreat silently into autonomous adventures not to be shared.

I wake in the night needing to go to the bathroom. I'm not sure what annoys me more; the fact that I have to drag myself out of bed into the cold, the fire being a long distant and luxurious memory, or my subconscious insisting on calling it *the bathroom*. A demeaning title for such scenery but in the darkness it is the only purpose it will currently serve. I lie awake thinking about it for a long time before I get up, delaying the inevitable. Eventually I rummage for my head torch and find my clothes. The quieter I behave the louder I become. He turns himself over in his cocoon and grunts.

Outside I find a spot and turn off my head torch. It scares me the way it catches the birch trees in the beam, giving them sinister silhouettes like long limbed beasts. I watch the cliffs rise up to meet the stars and listen to the water bubbling in the burn. I wait for my flow to abate.

Back inside I stop at the base of the stairs to look out of the big window over the long abandoned Belfast sink. The bothy book says people have lived here from 1674 till early into the 20th century. I wonder how many of them have stood in this exact spot thinking out the witching hour. Not all of them though, some memories being relegated to the ruinous rubble out the back. The view documents the journey in from the road across the four wheel drive track, open meadow and boggy earth to the climax at the icy river lying in wait for clumsy feet. Only the car is still safely hidden from view. When the sun rises illuminating the rich palette of heather and earth it will look beautiful but for now it is an ensemble of shadows. In the distance two beams appear where the track comes into view, pointing straight at the window like a long range sight. I turn off my head torch in fright and watch as the beams weave their way towards the bothy.

I run upstairs and shake him awake. *People are coming!* He grunts and rubs his eyes. My wristwatch reads two am. Not the usual time you'd expect others, but they can come when they want. The landscape belongs to no one and visitors are not subject to vetting. *You wait here, I'll check it out* he says as he

throws on some clothes and I hand him the head torch. I keep my clothes on and climb back into bed. No point waiting in the cold. If folk are coming he'll have the fire going soon enough and the warmth of a dram on offer. The door slams as he goes outside.

I wait and there is nothing, no word from him calling me to come down and be social; take a drink. No overzealous introductions, laughing or joking. My ear is to the floorboard trying to hear if the fire is crackling away below, but my efforts are reciprocated with anticipated silence. I haven't heard the distinctive creak of the hinge when the back door opens, signalling he's come back inside. I keep company with the stars through the small skyward window set into the slanted roof and in my patience fall asleep. I awake to daylight, devoid of company in a cloudless sky. His cocoon lies next to me hollow and deflated.

Downstairs everything is the same, empty glasses and ashen embers from our evening by the fire. The breakfast bag is hung high on a hook to dismay the mice and the milk bottle lies untouched outside the door kept cool from the crisp night air. I walk around the bothy calling his name but only my voice replies echoed back off the hills. I check the birch and the burn; I squint up at the ridge. I walk myself in ever decreasing circles back to the bothy and stare out the window from the Belfast sink.

I roll up his sleeping bag and place his things neatly in a pile. I leave them in the bedroom hoping he will soon find his way back. The western sits on top, dog-eared where he last left his adventure to be continued. I sling my rucksack on my back; the strap still stuck and put the car keys in my pocket. I call his name till my throat is hoarse and cast my eyes in every direction looking for a sign of him, a footprint to follow. But there is nothing, just the sound of the thirsty wolf lapping at my feet and the shine of a silver stone in the distance.