

Julian and Uncle Pat

by Christopher Nicholson

The hall was dark panelling with the ancient skulls of deer hung high. The boy came down the stairs, clumping in his heavy boots. In a dark corner of the lobby stood a pair of dripping waders and beside that, on a plastic bag, a large salmon freshly caught from the loch. The sight halted the boy. He looked at the silver body, the thread of reddish flesh hanging from the edge of the half parted mouth. The eyes were filmy blue. The air smelt of kippers.

The boy did not touch the fish. Instead he went outside and waited by the car. The sun shone bright on the gravelled car park. The gleaming creeper that swarmed up the hotel to the Gothic battlements had leaves like misshapen hands.

The boy lifted his feet in his new boots. He clumped up and down, and stamped. Then the uncle came out, in thick orange socks, carrying a rucksack. He was a fattish man, going bald. He walked rather gingerly on the gravel.

"All set?"

With him was the boy's aunt, Aunt Kitty. She looked serious.

"Have you got everything, Julian? Your compass?"

"Yes."

"Your whistle?"

Julian touched it in his pocket, hard and cold.

"And your packed lunch?"

"Yes."

The hotel's smooth, mossy lawn led down towards the loch. That was where the salmon had been caught. In the middle of the loch there was a tiny island, with a pine tree. The loch was dark but bright and on the far side lay a belt of rhododendron in full bloom, brilliant crimson in the sunshine. Beyond that, rising, was the mountain, and this too seemed dark, though with patches of light.

Uncle Pat gave a huge stretch, as if intending to embrace the mountain. Above his socks he wore pale green moleskin breeches. He patted his wife on the back.

"Don't fuss yourself Kitty. We're not going up the hard route."

The aunt seemed only partly convinced. She said to Julian:

"Are your boots comfortable? Are you wearing two pairs of socks?"

"Yes."

He wiggled his toes. Boots were the most important piece of equipment for walking – Julian knew that. If your boots were wrong everything else was wrong.

"Well, do take care. See you at five."

They climbed in the car. Julian sat in the front seat and saw his aunt waving in the side mirror. Uncle Pat, still in socks, drove past the tennis court, which was netless, and covered in clumps of spongy moss.

"What did you have for breakfast?"

"Kippers."

"Kippers, eh? Good man, good man. You're well fuelled."

Emerging from the cover of the rhododendrons, the car rumbled over a cattle grid. The land was suddenly bare moor, and the mountain, which had seemed quite near, looked much further away and disappointingly small. But here they were seeing it head-on, like the front of a ship: within minutes, once the road had skirted the edge of the loch, its vastness was manifest for it was exposed lengthways as a series of peaks running along a jagged ridge of upraised rock. The steep cliffs that swept from this ridge were locked in smoky blue shadow.

"How high is it?"

"About three thousand seven hundred." Uncle Pat eyed it with relish. "Grand day for a climb. See the saddle? That's where we're going. Then we cut left, up to the top."

Puffy clouds drifted in a largely blue sky, their shadows streaking across the moor. Then the road dipped, and both mountain and moor vanished from view.

They parked by a wooden bridge that crossed a lively burn; a wooden signpost pointed uphill. The track, printed with the bootmarks of other walkers, took them past stunted birch trees dripping wet, and around great greeny-red hummocks of moss and crowberry. Duckboards had been laid in one short stretch to protect the path. Julian went in front, his anorak swishing; behind, he could hear Uncle Pat breathing loudly above the din of the burn which had in fact begun to fade, for the track had struck away and was climbing beyond the trees. In a moment the ridge of the mountain reappeared, with its fantastic silhouette.

"Hold on."

Uncle Pat was calling. He caught up, rather pink.

"Warm work. How're the boots doing?"

"Fine."

"Way to do a walk like this is to pace oneself. Go steady, not too fast. Know the tortoise and the hare?"

They tramped on. Under Julian's boots the peaty ground was pleasantly soft and springy. Meadow pipits burst from the heather. They drew near a slick of black bog; in its edge lay the bleached carcass of a tree, the same colour as the skulls in the hotel. Here Uncle Pat called another halt. He sat himself on the dead tree and lit a cigarette.

"So you've never been up a proper mountain one before?"

"Not really. Not a real mountain."

"Well, this is a real pukka mountain all right."

Julian remained standing, his eyes narrowed. "There's someone up there!"

Uncle Pat frowned. "So there is. Two of them. Could be deer."

It was hard to say; into the sun, they were not so much identifiable shapes as miniscule twitchings, as if a rock was rearranging itself. For the first time Julian had a sense of how big the mountain really was, how much climbing they had to do.

"Is it steep on the other side of the saddle?"

"Might be a bit of a drop. Got your parachute with you?"

Julian was puzzled. Then he saw Uncle Pat's grin.

They went on. At a little lochan they stopped again to eat their packed lunches. Uncle Pat was sweating: his face now a lively brick colour. He wiped his bald patch.

"Not in condition for this sort of thing. Too old. Used to be able to run up these hills like a goat. How old are you? Ten?"

"Nine."

"Wish I was nine. Not in trim at all." He peeled open a sandwich and contemplated the thick wad of flesh. "Tongue," he said.

The waters of the lochan were darkish brown, even in sunlight. A strong breeze drove rumpled folds of discoloured froth to the shore.

"Uncle Pat, do fish mind when they're caught? I mean, being hooked, does it hurt much?"

Uncle Pat seemed surprised. "Not at all. Fish are cold-blooded creatures."

"Can't they feel anything? The hook in their mouths?"

"Not a thing." Uncle Pat yawned and surveyed the lochan. He yawned again. "Oh dear. Dear me."

The stones on the lochan's edge were warm in the sun. Yet the mountain's upper slopes, below its array of cornices and crenellations, lay in dusky shadow. Julian pointed.

"Is that the hard route?"

Uncle Pat looked.

"Yup. Sort of fox track. Could be fun. Don't tell your aunt."

"No," said Julian, very uncertain.

"Jolly good. I'll have a quick wee," said Uncle Pat.

The fox track was clearly visible for a while, but under the ridge it lost itself. Julian's eyes lifted to the terrifying splurge of parapets by the summit, around which a few grey clouds had begun to gather. Some black specks, birds, were flying below the clouds, and as he traced their movements the skin creased in the back of his neck and his eyeballs pressed high in their sockets. Then Uncle Pat came back, zipping up.

"May be a bit of a scramble. Go at your own pace, take it easy."

For the first time in the day he took the lead, striking to the right, passing several huge greyish boulders which, at some stage, must have fallen from the cliffs. Now Julian was in the mountain's shadow, and this seemed to mark a very profound change. The air was cooler, the silence deeper, as if the mountain was asserting itself. The path narrowed, and also rose much much more steeply, almost as if it was going for a direct assault on the summit, before changing its mind and joining a jumble of rocks at the base of a vast chute of scree. There came a shout. Julian glanced up. Uncle Pat was suddenly far above him, moving up the chute like a man possessed.

"Meet you at the top!"

The slope above rose hundreds of feet to a bulging unbuttressed crag brushed by a dark finger of cloud. The slope below was almost as appalling. Raising a hand in acknowledgment, the boy began to climb. By now, the fox track had disintegrated; it was a matter of picking whatever way one wanted through the loose scree, and at every step he dislodged rocks that clattered away. The higher he went, the steeper the slope became, and the greater the hostility pouring from the mountain. He dared not look either up or down, only at his boots. Then he reached a grassy gully. He was nearly there. Gasping, he risked another glance: what remained, the last few yards to the saddle, were vertical, overhanging. A lip of grass stuck out, dripping on wet rock. There was no sign of Uncle Pat. He shouted.

"Uncle Pat! Uncle Pat!"

The silence was awesome: the breeze had dropped, there seemed to be no sound at all, apart from the roaring in his ears.

"Uncle Pat?"

Below him he had another glimpse of the moor which they'd crossed, and the hotel's little loch, where the salmon had been caught...Suddenly a tuft of grass he'd been holding gave way and

came out at the roots: his foot slipped, he scrabbled for another tuft, held still and waited, a pulse thudding in his neck, knowing it was impossible to retreat, that he had to go on.

"Uncle Pat?"

Hands were pressing on his shoulders, trying to push him down; desperate, he crawled on. Once he'd got to the ridge and found Uncle Pat he'd be all right. All he needed was to get on to the ridge. And it was not far now, not far, not far, nearly there, nearly there. The overhanging lip was above his head, like a piece of thatch. He hauled himself round it and dragged his body to the narrow ridge. At that moment, his eyes took in the immensity of the drop on the other side, the sheerness of the ragged parapets that led to the summit, the blind fumbings of the clouds. The sky's weight nailed him to the ground: he lay, outstretched, rigid, clutching rocks, alone.

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The uncle, a fattish, balding man in orange socks and pale green breeches, clambered round the last citadel of rock. He was breathing heavily, back sopping under his rucksack, calves aching. But he was rather chuffed, even triumphant. He hadn't climbed a mountain this high in years. The magnificent panorama of tiny blue lochans and dark peaks and peat-bog made him remember what life was all about, what life ought to be: how it had been when he was young and free and not so fat, before he'd started the business. He settled by the summit cairn and lit a cigarette. Bags of time ahead for the descent to the hotel; they could take it easy. By half four they'd be back. A crow or raven, black bird anyway, drifted up on a rising current as the uncle wondered what the hotel might lay on for high tea – drop-scones, of course, then gammon steak, or a nice fresh trout...or potted shrimps....

The bird passed the man by a few feet, then let itself be swept towards the saddle. The boy was still there: eyes shut, clawing the rocks, with the shuddering drop on either side. He was not in fact that big a boy. Here, clinging to the ridge, he looked quite small. A tongue of cloud licked at his ankles, the wind gently ruffled his hair. The wind gently ruffled the feathers of the bird, and the bird dipped its head, and allowed itself to sink into the abyss.