

**People of these Glens
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So. I am 83 years old, and the father of Famous Author Jim McEachan. I say this because it is all people are interested in, wherever they meet me. Even in this desolate place, the young ranger looks at me with undisguised interest, purely because of those two facts.

"I have been walking at approximately one-point-five kilometres per hour for the past four hours," I tell him.

He nods slowly, and smiles, taking in my bent frame, scrutinizing my grizzled chin emerging from under a tattered balaclava.

I continue, "This is slower than my intended pace, mainly because of the ice underfoot. I have food supplies for ten days, and an equivalent amount of cooking gas. All is going to plan."

"Apart from your pace."

"Yes. Apart from my pace."

The smile slowly disappears, to be replaced by a worried frown. It looks deliberate. I am reminded of nurses who feel a duty to look concerned.

I can smell last night's whisky on his breath. He coughs, and spits amber-coloured phlegm into the snow. "They're talking about it being the coldest night for a decade."

I reply with an itemised list of my equipment, including the age and cost of the modern items. This is followed by a detailed explanation of my vast expedition experience.

It works. He leaves me alone, and in the gathering gloaming I move slowly, too slowly, towards the lee of a roofless ruin by the loch.

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Now. The gas is fizzing slightly. A skin of ice has formed on the cartridge, and glutinous orange soup pops and bubbles. The routine of an expedition campsite is comforting. I enjoy the smell of the canvas, the grotty discoveries of mints, five-pences, and train tickets that appear every time the tent is erected. I like the delicious dry warmth of fresh socks, and slipping into a five-season down sleeping bag. I love the feeling of lying on the ground with only a couple of centimetres of closed-cell plastic between me and the great, welcoming earth of the west highlands.

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Did I fall asleep? Strange, because the tent-flap is still open for cooking duties, revealing a moonlit snow bank and the shadow of the ruin. Tiredness must be hitting me hard.

It is now that I do something very unusual.

I decide to leave the tent.

Other people leave their tents in the night as a matter of course, I am sure. For a pee, to look at the stars, to exult in the darkness of a sodium-free night. Not I. My large pee-bottle has never been filled in one go. I treat my tent as a nest to curl up in away from the blackness, hibernating until morning's welcome glow awakes me.

I slot feet into waiting boots, pick up a walking-pole, and lever myself out of the entrance. Crunching through frozen snow, I move in front of the ruin. The brightness of the moon is startling, and reflects off the frozen surface of the loch below in a muted manner. The air feels sharp. I am breathing ice crystals, the pure coldness sliding in and out of lungs with a smoothness that I must have experienced when younger, but never appreciated at the time. The shadowed, snow-plastered mountains before me have an ethereal air of menace about them, which is strangely non-threatening.

It is as I am making a mental note to mention this unusual thought to my son, the Author, that I spot the figure at the far end of the ruin, not ten feet away. For some reason, it is hard to tell what he is wearing, despite the moonshine. He has longish curly hair, not unlike the ranger, and he is looking sideways, directly at me.

I should feel alarmed. There shouldn't be another person within ten miles of here. I saw no tracks in the snow, and there is no other obvious way up the glen.

I don't feel alarmed.

He gestures to a hitherto unnoticed child, a boy, aged ten or eleven, and they walk over, slowly, quietly. A hand is extended and I take it, feeling roughness and dry warmth. The boy grins up.

The man rests his hand on the boy's head, and speaks in a clear, friendly tone. "So, your business?"

I explain about the plan, to experience wilderness in Britain, to escape the city, noise, people. This takes a while, I think, although it is hard to tell, as he is listening with obvious interest. The boy, too, is attentive.

A silence. A reply. "So, you come here to get away from folks. I hope you don't object to our presence."

I don't get a chance to reply, to say no, of course not, it is a pleasure to meet them both.

He continues. "I have met your kind before. You curl up in your little houses, and move on again next morning, like traders. But you are not here to buy or sell. You are here to look at what surrounds us. I like this. It is good to appreciate the hard slope of a hill, to drink from a quenching spring. It is good that you have the time, the desire...the *ability* to walk, sit and sleep here."

I wonder if this is a reference to my age.

He points to the ruin. "But think of the builders of this fine house. Look at the cornerstones, the lintel."

His voice raises slightly. "What do you think about the people here, in your wilderness? The laughing voices as water is collected, the arguments, the shouting, the pain of birth and death, the sweet soft pleasure of love-making in a cosy home heated by the steam of cattle?"

The boy looks vaguely embarrassed.

I realise that silence has once again arrived, and that I should talk. But I can think of nothing to say.

He slowly cocks his head, and in the strange light I can see smiling eyes. "It was good meeting you, my friend. Go well."

And the two of them drift away.

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I write all this down, like I write everything down. I don't know what kind of experience it was. I worry slightly that the care home will be hinted at again on return to that busy city.

As I look out of my tent this bitter bright morning, at the dull-frozen loch surrounded by more ruins than you would think possible, I think of those people who didn't see this as a wild place, but as home.

Perhaps the best way to remember them is to sit, and stare, and imagine all that messy humanity here in these glens, contrasting with the far-off bark of deer and crack of ice. Perhaps we should accept that wildness is a human concept, and that the lack of humans in a place is both sad and beautiful.

Perhaps I should think about brewing tea, and preparing for a slow walk through glens which have more stories to tell than my son could ever write.