

Mountain Avens

by Nancy Somerville

It was only when her front door was knocked that Avril realised she'd also heard a vehicle approaching the cottage. Her mind had been on the flower she'd found up on Beinn Mhòr.

She pushed herself up from the kitchen table muttering, "You're gettin daft in your auld age. Dreamin again."

She opened the door to Calum the postman. This morning he had a younger man with him.

"Mornin Miss Cowan. How are we today?"

"Mornin Calum. I see ye've brought a chaperon."

He laughed, "This is Rab, my replacement. Just showin him the route." Then, winking at her he turned to his companion, "Ye'll have to watch out for this one, Rab. She sends away for things, just so she can have a handsome postman knocking at her door."

"Aye, and at last ye've brought me one!" Avril replied, taking a solid looking parcel from him .

She hugged it to her as Calum and Rab got back into the vehicle and she waved in response to the horn sounding a cheerio. She watched the red post-bus swaying as it chugged up the narrow road to its next port of call. She liked Calum. They had talked last week about his own approaching retirement and he'd asked her advice. He'd been friendly, but not pushy. She knew he wasn't just after tidbits of information to pass on about the latest incomer - unlike some of his passengers.

She'd been tempted to stick her tongue out at the faces scrutinising her from the bus's back windows but she didn't want to give them any more to gossip about than what they'd probably made up already. And in any case, she knew that, although at the moment she was revelling in the new-found luxury of solitude, there would probably come a time when she would want to make an effort and get to know folk. She'd likely join one of the local groups like the the Women's Guild, as had been suggested more than once when she'd called at the village post office. Sooner or later they'd find out all about her - they were bound to - but first she wanted this time to herself, in that she was determined. She deserved it. More than that, she needed it.

The nursing home had been hard physical work, but it wasn't just feeling exhausted after every shift that had eventually persuaded her to take retirement; it was the toll it took on her mental health too. Listening to some of the residents say that their lives were over had at first made her all too aware of her own age and aching joints. Then a year ago she'd taken some of her fitter charges on a day trip. Driving the minibus through a lush glen with forested hills on either side and grey mountain tops rising beyond, she'd seen a cottage for sale, miles from anywhere, and the germ of an idea had been planted.

She'd moved into her own cottage about six weeks ago; a different one, not quite so remote. She was realistic enough to acknowledge that, at her age, she needed to be relatively close to other people and services. But for now, she was taking time to disentangle herself - herself! - from the memories of other people's lives and problems. Once she felt she'd left all that behind she would start making an effort to get to know her neighbours. And there was always the post-bus.

She sighed and laughed, "There I go again. Tryin to plan ahead. Pretendin I'm in control. Then will be then, now is now."

She looked across the rough moorland to the grey sea beyond and sighed again, this time with renewed pleasure at being here, alone.

Avril went back through to the kitchen and put the parcel onto the table. She lifted and judged the weight of the kettle before switching it on. As the sound of the heating water rose, she stood at the window, looking out at the mountain.

She hoped her discovery would still be there, up near the sheep-track she usually followed on her walks. A few weeks ago she'd sat on a familiar rock which jutted out from the slope and, instead of enjoying the view as she gathered her breath, she had looked down to examine more closely her improvised chair. Peeping out from under it was a wee white flower. It delighted her.

In the days that followed, she began to feel a kinship with it. The flower was hanging on in its own little niche, looking vulnerable, but somehow cheery and hopeful. She found herself speaking to it as she sat on the rock, or if feeling more energetic, as she climbed past it on her way to the first ridge.

"Hello. I see ye're still wi us." Or, "Did ye enjoy that rain last night."

She didn't know what kind of flower it was; it looked a bit like a daisy. She wished she knew its proper name. So this time her order had been for a book on plant identification.

As the kettle clicked itself off, she automatically turned to make her coffee. Then, on impulse, changed into her walking boots, pulled on her jacket, grabbed the parcel and set off up the slope.

Reaching the rock, she checked that the plant had survived the night and any wandering sheep or deer, then sat down and began tearing open the cardboard packaging.

'Mountain Avens ', she read, 'Dryas Octopetala'.

"A big name for a wee flooer," Avril told it. "I'm impressed. Are ye sure ye're no too grand for the likes o me?"

She laughed, "What's wrong wi the likes o me?"

She could do what she liked now, talk to flowers if she felt like it. There was nobody around to expect her to be sensible. Now she could say and do what she liked. This was her time, responsible for no-one but herself. She'd never felt so free!

She leaned back and looked up to the sky. That cloud was a little island in a powder blue sea. And that wisp of white was smoke from a passing steamer. She was glad the ship itself didn't materialise. She didn't want rescued yet. She wasn't stranded; she'd escaped.

She looked down at her flower nodding in the breeze. And the natives were friendly.