

Mountain Writing Competition 2022

3rd Place

The Mountain Decides

By Max Munday

Max lives in West Wales on the edge of the Black Mountains. He is a keen hillwalker, cyclist, and fisherman.

There is both a blessing and curse associated with 'odd' names; rarely forgotten for good or bad.

The scene is a quiet Friday night hotel bar in Wester Ross. It is October 2009 at the height of the stalking season. Dr Vars Linz, keen hill bagger, asks whether there might be any problems accessing the hills behind the hotel. The host thinks there could be shooting in the morning, but helpfully provides an email address:

"They usually get back to you pretty quickly or can suggest alternatives".

Varslinz52@yahoo.co.uk

Hillwalking-PentonWest@googlemail.com

*Hi, I was wondering whether there would be any access problems on your hills tomorrow? Thank you.
Vars*

Hillwalking-PentonWest@googlemail.com

Varslinks52@yahoo.co.uk

Hello, there is no shooting on the estate this week and you are welcome on those hills. You are also welcome to drive up the estate road to the lodge as this will save you an hour's walk from the car park in the village. If anyone stops you on the track just say Harry okayed it.

Vars did not expect that. This would be an improvement on the long trudge up the forest track to access the hill.

An early start on the morrow. Into the car, away from the hotel and through imposing but fading estate gates. Just over 15 minutes of carefully avoided potholes brings him to a large white lodge. Empty, dark and little used. Yet the nearby keeper's bungalow shows plenty of activity: yapping dogs, kid's bikes, tendrils of chimney smoke, mud splattered Land Rover and an Argocat prepped for business. Vars worries a mistake has been made and there is shooting after all. But yapping dogs are silenced by a man with florid face and prematurely grey. He waves (a good sign) and ambles over to the car.

"Are you the Vars who emailed last night?"

Normal pleasantries are made and Vars thanks him for the favour of the parking. The man evidently has something else on his mind however and ...

"I think you might have met my father once; do you remember a Stan Williams? I think you came to our house in the late 60s?"

A sudden hollow feeling suddenly in his stomach. Yes, Vars did remember. But not this estate. Vars knew well the date, the day, the year 1969, the weather, the location, the incident...but not the final outcome. His memories are crystal clear.

Dutch father, English mother. English home, Dutch name. The younger Vars, not the engineering type like his father, and wishing to go to college as far away from home on the South Coast as possible. Good results get him to Edinburgh...medicine; enjoys cycling and rugby, but new friends quickly get him hooked on the hills. Weekends away in mildewed huts, often soaking wet, freezing cold, but then those crisp sunny days. In his second year there are more solo trips to the northwest Highlands. One Saturday in October, a remote hill. He should never really have been up there alone. Poor quality waterproofs in grey screaming weather and poor visibility. Fed up with being blown off his feet, he tracks off the ridge to get out of the wind and is prepared for a longer walk back to the village where he is staying. The comparative calm gained by dropping leeward leads to mere short term relief. Calmer conditions come with the inevitable descent on steep unsafe slippery ground, presumably never trodden before. It never looks that bad on the map. One horrible beetling outcrop after another to negotiate and the rain becoming more miserable by the minute. No real possibility now of going back to the ridge.

On a particular steep, his greasy feet cause a small rock fall. He jumps...fright...momentarily his breath leaves him. Rocks well mossed jammed in a crack and his clumsy feet had loosened the lot. But lodged in the crack are bodily remains. Not that frightening really as this is someone long dead and folded awkwardly into a small diagonal crack in the granite. Bones white and green, tatters of tweeds, a twisted boot, a leather bag or some such in shreds. The medical student is used to bodies, but the shock, the circumstance, the loneliness, and the situation leave him momentarily dazed. He moves off a few yards to take breath. He moves back again to the crack to make sure it is what it is. What to do? He is responsible, it must be reported, but how to find this place again. His best solution is tying an orange carrier bag from his sack onto a dead tree branch. He stakes it nearby and hopes it can be spotted from lower down. This done he flees down through the gloom.

Once off the steeps a long boggy walk to the closest house on the map. Some miles off a light shows in the dusk. The light has finally gone as he knocks the cottage door. A woman answers...a little shocked at the bedraggled sight...

"Are you OK?"

"Yes I am, but..."

He is told to sit on a bench in the porch while she goes inside. The man appears...older, greying, in overalls. He listens to the sorry tale. Stan Williams, the keeper and eminently practical.

"There's nothing we can do tonight. I am calling the police. I'll see what they say but they will want you to show them what you found. It won't be easy because I can't quite figure where you came off the hill. You better get the wet gear off and come in."

Tea, stew, a series of phone calls made by Stan.

"They are sending two policemen tomorrow early...are you okay to stay with us as it will give us a head start in the morning?"

Vars sits in with the couple close to the fire. Two children have been packed off to bed but are well aware of the drama afoot. Stan questions Vars closely about the scene...the body...tall? short? was it a man? did it look like a fall? Vars was not sure whether short or tall or male...difficult to see how it could have fallen into the crack but who knows the vagaries of the mountain.

Sunday morning. Windy but clear. Vars is led to understand that Stan is normally in Church on Sunday (twice – wee Free apparently – no stalking on Sundays). Two police officers arrive at 8am (Sam and Gerry - well known to Stan). They are closely followed by four others from the closest mountain rescue team (not known to Stan) and:

“Unnecessary as we can just put the corpse on the pony.”

A long trudge back to the hill, well off the beaten track according to the rescue team. Stan, leading the pony, spends much of the trudge in deep conversation with Sam. The strengthening wind means Vars hears little but gets the impression that both men might be aware of the identity of the corpse. Some praise for Vars comes from the rescue team as they spot what looks like a satsuma stuck on a poll half way up the hill ...

“Would never have found the guy otherwise....good thinking.”

The scene is little improved in the better weather. The pony has to be left. The steep ground makes movement difficult. Stan and Sam approach the crack. Vars is momentarily relieved that the body is still there. A series of photographs are taken by Sam. The remains are then carefully removed and placed on a plastic sheet. There are a few items placed in a canvas bag by Sam and Gerry. What looks to Vars like rifle shells, some coins (old crowns according to Sam), the rusted remains of what looks like a lighter and some other bits and pieces. Vars, the aspiring medic, notes that the skull is damaged in several places, but he only gets a brief look before the remains are closeted in a large bag and stretchered out by the team.

And that was pretty much the sum of the incident for Vars. Sam and Gerry took a detailed statement from him in the keeper’s cottage. He is thanked by the police. Stan the keeper gives Vars a lift out and thanks him for taking the time to report the incident. Vars asks Stan whether he knew who the man might be but there is a studious sad silence.

Vars hears nothing more. Returns to Edinburgh. Finishes medical school. Returns to England and in the 40 years after the incident has a successful surgical career, ironically often repairing the damage caused by too much hillwalking. He gets North as often as possible to enjoy the hills but has already reached the ‘trouble keeping up’ stage.

So then yes Vars did meet Stan Williams 40 years previously. Vars had not forgotten the name, and evidently Stan’s son Harry must have remembered the night and possibly his father must have told him the tale of the medic with the odd name who found old remains in the middle of nowhere.

Vars and Harry walk a little up the track towards the hill of the day. Harry seems keen to talk. Stan has been dead for some years apparently. Vars asks whether Stan actually did know anything about the body. Harry unwinds the tale.

Stan had been keeper for many years on the estate where Vars had found the body and his father before that. The laird when Stan had been young in the 1930s had been a good old man, generous to a fault, old soldier, not too worried about balancing the books, held in high regard by all and sundry and with jobs on the estate always sought after by the locals. An old story apparently. Good father, dissolute and angry son, with a strong whisky habit. The failing old man wanting to leave the land to

a more responsible nephew. The old man would often wander off alone on the estate with an old rook rifle to shoot vermin. One October he had gone off, rifle in hand and never returned. An extensive search. Body never found. The son took over and slowly reduced the estate. There were always rumours but no proof. Stan had found what looked very much like that old rook rifle in an attic when repairing the roof in the main house, but the old man had plenty of guns. Stan never got on with the son of the laird, but jobs were hard to come by in the 1940s and he had taken over from his father as keeper. But for Stan, Vars' discovery had been a line in the sand. The investigation was inconclusive on cause of death given the ancient state of the remains. Not so Stan. Stan saw the scene. For Stan it was body placed not body fallen.

Harry tells Vars that his father resigned his keeper's position even before the investigation. A deeply religious man he could not continue working on the estate. There was some short-term difficulty finding another position, loss of the tied house, but he was a keeper with good reputation and had been taken on by the estate on which they were now walking. Harry had taken over as head keeper when his father's health had failed.

Vars and Harry shake hands. Harry tells him to come into the house after his walk. Vars says it might have been better he had never stumbled across the body. Harry shakes his head. No. Stan held that the mountain had yielded the body. The drunken son of the laird had hung himself just a few months after the discovery.