

## The Journey

By Linda Woode

The slope from the road seemed steeper than usual and she had to pace herself on the rough path. She should have brought a stick, but that had been forgotten in the packing up for a journey she did not wish to make and which others had advised her not to make. She stopped to adjust the rucksack and look across the moor. Was she high enough? They usually walked across high and came back low. It just worked out that way. Maybe low would be better today. She climbed off the path and started out across the moor.

It was heavy going. It was still raining although not cold and the tussocks afforded no grip. Many times her feet slipped into pools of water between and she held her breath in case the additional weight forced her over. A bad idea going too low. It seemed a long time before the dam briefly glimpsed suddenly appeared beneath her and she began the knee jerking descent down. It never used to seem to take that long when they all walked across together, not even when their rucksacks were laden with materials. Talking and laughing they soon saw that longed for glimmer of silver and commented how quickly time had gone. Or perhaps memories foreshortened the reality. Today time meant nothing and progress was slow.

The new gate at the end of the dam was awkward to negotiate and she was glad for the first time that she had not brought the dog, remembering how hard it had been to get her over earlier in the year. It was hard enough now to get herself over at six months pregnant. Although she would have welcomed the dog's company, or would she? On this journey numbness insulated her from the usual feelings of companionship. The wind was coming from down the loch, blowing the water over the low wall. She walked in puddles and every so often the waves broke and soaked her. The cold stung her face as she walked into the cloud which obliterated the other side. She remembered the time they had crossed in a blizzard and she had had to force herself to walk across in a gale clutching the rail as the snow whirled round, and the water splashed up.

Once over, she could make out the path. The cross challenge bikes had left their ruts which had filled with water. Two sections done, she told herself, just the one to go. The steams were up. She had known they would have been. Her boots were soaked anyway so she waded across clutching at stones as she reached the other side. If the others were here they would have helped each other over, told her to stand up straight. But there was only herself.

The path along the Chiarain water ran with water. She stopped again to adjust the rucksack before shortening her stride to cope with the steep pull up. The cloud was so low she only saw the monument when she was level with it. Put up to the minister from London who died in the January snows almost a century ago. Where he had been going was unknown to her: the Kingshouse was a likely starting point but there was no house at Chiarain in those days and a long walk beyond to Staoinaig. Wherever, he never made it. She tried not to imagine the weight of the long coat dragging him down, the effort to put one foot in front of the other. He must have been on the wrong river - there wasn't even a path on the side he had been found. The wrong track - although he must have been convinced it was the right one and continued on. The certainty of his convictions pulling him on to his death. She imagined the urge to lie down in the snow and to forget as hypothermia played tricks with the mind. But she would make it. There was the bit where the water became broad and calm. Not far now. That big stream to cross, pass the high path to Loch Eilde Mor, ten minutes and she would be there.

And now that she was so near, she wished she was not. She did not want to arrive. There would be cold comfort for her there. The romanticised picture of bothy life: the fire, the company, the getting away from it all was not there. Problems got carried in and out again. It might have been possible to forget them for a while but they huddled in the cold at the edges of the room waiting to be picked up with the rucksack on the return journey. No. She was under no illusion on this visit.

The bothy's chimneys appeared and suddenly it was there dark against the grey loch. For a moment her heart leapt before she told herself off. Tonight there would be only herself. She negotiated the last steep drop down to the river, balanced over the boulders and approached the house from the back. It stood tucked in to the hill, like a wounded animal hunched against a wall. As she turned the corner her heart seemed to stop and then she saw the smashed windows, the reason for her visit, jagged like broken teeth. Once the house had stood proud and inhabited but now it was a shell, its heart torn out. It was a house providing shelter but not a home any more. And still someone had come to mock its downfall further.

When she had first heard, her anger had flared but now it was spent although the ashes still left a bad taste in her mouth. Carefully she took off her rucksack, flexed her shoulders and unbolted the door. In the semi-darkness womb world she sensed that there was no one there. She would have felt the house's pain if it had felt pain. And yet as she stood at the door neither inside nor out, she knew that the house did not want her pain or her pity or her anger. It did not want anything from her. It did not want. It was she and others who had wanted from it and the surrounding hills, imposing a meaning that was not there. And yet the hills and the house defied the meaning which was really an attempt to tame them and by taming them to control them. They merely stood, and suffered others to hang their meanings on them. This thought formed itself inside her, gradually gaining in size until it forced the other feelings aside. She would need to let go as eventually she would need to let the child inside her go. She knew that now.

In the meantime she needed to change into dry clothes and mend the windows. As she bent down to her rucksack she noticed that the bothy disk on the door was smashed too. That would need to be replaced. And the door could do with a coat of paint .....