

**The Last Bothy**  
**By Phyllis Anderson**

"Sylvie, you're nearest. Jump out."

The driver tilts the interior mirror to gain a better view of rear seats. Raven locks skim a cloth bound book which she slips into a jacket pocket then slides the door. Sharp gust, she digs her soles into asphalt eventually reaching a level crossing. Doreen watches from a passenger seat, scarlet lips pursed as Sylvie lifts a handset from its metal base. John manoeuvres the camper van to a four bar gate rolling the window down. Sleet sweeping across tarmac.

"Well? What did they say?"

He tries to wrest an explanation from puzzled features.

"The line died."

"What did the guy say?"

"Central computer at the rail network has crashed. He couldn't advise me."

"Open the gates!"

Diesel engine strikes a salutary chord and silence prevails. Sylvie leafs through vellum pages. Doreen thrusts a straw into hard plastic sucks juice from a carton. Pensive expression trails John's craggy features his hands tighten their grip. Flakes of snow fall like ghosts resigned to their fate. Doreen idly pushes buttons, searching through interference. She finds radio silence so depresses the off switch seeking explanation beyond a misted window. Wind wipers upgraded to maximum, tachycardic beat on glass, occasional jolt over pot holes - surreal snow shaker dream.

Thoughts cased in granite, fingertips raking her glossy hair, Doreen turns towards the driver.

"What do you see?"

John's eyes fix ahead.

"I see mountains."

"How about you, Sylvie?"

Using her thumb as a book mark eyes wander off the page.

"I see spiders webs beaded with crystal raindrops."

John seeks the questioner's opinion.

Downward gaze through black rimmed spectacles. "I see my nail polish is chipped."

The engine stutters then dies. Handbrake ratcheted home.

"This is it. End of the road."

John notes the date and year: 20:05:2012. Removes his watch, straps it to the

interior mirror. He steps outside. Collar pulled up against glacial chill. Doreen stares into white out nibbling skin around her thumb. Immaculately stacked on hooks and rails the cavernous boot reveals rucksacks, poles, torches, provisions, sleeping bags, mats. They load their share of the supplies. John places a box, white cross emblazoned on green background in the top section of his rucksack. Sylvie, intrigued expression playing across her face surveys black iron gates. She nudges Doreen who stares at a hunting lodge in the style of an Austrian schloss, romantic turrets and spires.

John depresses buttons on a mobile phone. Doreen is distracted by a series of clicks.

"Is it not working, John?"

"Nah. Signal's dead."

The trio stare at the fairy tale castle. Sylvie is convinced a princess is slumbering beyond an oval window in the upper floor.

"Is this the bothy, John?"

Suppressing laughter. "Not quite, Sylvie."

"How long will the walk in take?"

John strokes his pointed chin.

"As long as it takes!"

The group follow a track which passes the lodge. Sylvie pauses to consider the viewpoint across the loch from a bench which is positioned on a plinth inside the grounds. A herd of ornamental deer nuzzle the earth in vain hope of sweet grass. John stops to inspect Land Rover tread marks. He cocks an ear to a path which heads to open country then sifts the sky watching charcoal specks coalesce until blue traces are obliterated. The girls catch up and they agree to increase their pace. Cold rations are eaten en route. Words beaten flat by fierce winds. There is a need to reach shelter before dark, before the leaden sky spills its contents. Turning left onto a rough path, John watches for discarded branches which he can break into manageable pieces over a coal fired stove. Wild ponies canter through the blizzard leaving their pitiful rack of hay. Muzzles hunger for apples so John proffers a pen knife throwing the final slices a few feet. Turns his head so that he won't see phantom hooves scrambling for remnants. They set off. John hoists a tree branch across his back which Doreen supports at the rear. Sharp turn left of a loch and pine forest lavishly iced with snow. They take turns to carry the branch over undulations snatching glimpses of a roof which is eventually united by yule log walls.

A footbridge.

Sylvie is first to cross. Averting her eyes from missing slats she awaits John and Doreen, calling out. "It's shoogly!"

Inside the bothy clothing is changed, wet things placed under sleeping bags.

A wooden platform each. They decorate the mantelpiece with a silver hip flask, box of Turkish delight, bottle of fruit soaked in rum, chocolate bars wrapped in foil.

"D'you think we'll climb Ben Alder tomorrow?"

Doreen's speech distorted on account of wedging two biscuits lengthways. John stokes the fire.  
"We'll see what tomorrow brings."

Lying flat in sleeping bags, they stare at crackling flames arms folded across their chests. Doreen scrabbles through her haversack retrieving a pack of tarot cards. John gropes for his hip flask.

"What about a ghost story, girls?"

"Or a poetry reading?" suggests Sylvie.

John tosses a coin into the air. Dull thud on pine.

Tap Tap. Tap.

"What the ..... ?"

Three pairs of eyes peer through the gloom trying to work out the origin of the sound.

Tap Tappity Tap.

Persistence hardens the rattle. John scrambles out of his sleeping bag quickly locates his rucksack unzipping the top compartment with furious fingers.

"GIRLS. STAY HERE."

Iron latch is carefully lifted. He wrenches the door back.

"STATE YOUR BUSINESS."

A tall figure is led into the room clad in a combat poncho, hood concealing his identity. He is forced to halt in front of the fireplace. The girls leap to their feet and John tosses something across the room which Doreen catches. A first aid box freed of a pistol which he uses to push the hood from the man's head.

"What the .....?"

Laughter rings out. The men embrace, air is rich with mirth.

"Solly my old mate!"

Deadpan response in bass tone.

"Will ye tak that pistol outta ma coupon."

A traveller's face hardened by the elements, Solly strokes the straight barrel.

"A Luger. Where d'ye get it?"

John sips from a hip flask. "My Grandfather procured it in the trenches." He suppresses a giggle.  
"The first aid kit was the only container it would fit."

Reunion of comrades melts tension. Warmth of the fire occasionally broken by one of the party venturing outside. Ghost stories, tarot cards, floor strewn with confectionery wrappers. Elixir of

powdered chocolate and coffee ensured no one slumbered. Colourful tales recounting basic training.

"Mind the time you blew up the NAAFI at Lympstone?"

Solly responds in flat tones. "Jest a wee altercation wi' a chip pan."

John pokes the fire alive, his intent confirmed by a sombre expression.

"IT'S TIME!"

"Time for what?" Doreen stifles a yawn. Sylvie wriggles into the depths of her sleeping bag. The door creaks open, John steps outside. Gradually the others follow him. Insulated against sub zero chill they stand in silence wondering about the navy blue sky, pin cushioned with sparkling messages. A comet flashes across Ben Alder, ancient logo swoosh then vanishes into endless night. John turns quickly his sentiments absorbed by a handkerchief. Amber glow beckons the group inside.

"Give me a hand Solly".

The girls look on bemused as a wooden bench is dismantled. An iron ring is unearthed from the centre of a hatch. Torchlight illumines a shaft leading to a metal ladder.

John issues instructions.

"Gather up everything, I mean everything we can use."

Tentative steps descending into unknown.

Prison cell dimensions, its walls are stacked with food tins, containers of water, bedding, a stove and gas bottles. Medical supplies line an entire wall and white respiratory masks hang from hooks. Sylvie inspects the tins which are grouped according to ingredients. Her index finger traces an illustration of a child knee deep in buttercups. One arm around a wicker basket brimful of strawberries the other shielding her eyes against sunlight. Sylvie's legs give way, she topples against a wall and the tin falls from her shaking hands. Glassy eyes implore John, her shoulders heaving with the weight of sobs.

"You knew didn't you?"

Her voice croaks with emotion.

"It's why you left your watch back there."

She forces out the words.

"When-will-we-know-for-sure?"

He points skyward and shrugs.

"When we see the first cockroach coming down the stairs."

Solly hangs lamps overhead his tall frame engulfing John.

"By the way. Is that pistol loaded?"

John starts towards a cardboard box which he sifts through then loads the pistol placing it in a holster at his side. A knowing glance to the group.

Paper plates on their knees, Solly dishes up baked beans, sausages and powdered mash followed by tinned pears and custard.

Sylvie recites the Lord's Prayer.

Ninety chalk marks on the wall one for each day. Holster on his hip tightened by three additional notches, John lifts four masks and distributes them to the group. Molasses steps, they follow in single file. The hatch grinds its freedom note. Nose to an inch wide gap John is afraid to inhale.

"Shhhh!"

A scraping sound.

He reaches for his holster signalling to Solly to lift the hatch. A cockroach stares into the eyes of a human, battle weary expression hard as rain pattering tin. Disparate species, allied in their determination to survive. Its proboscis threads enquiry so John drops his gaze, permitting entry. Inside the bunker it traces a singular path, stopping to inspect a Hessian sack. Ignoring Sylvie's shrieks it weaves through fibres for stray grain.

One by one the group ascend on weakened legs. All that remains of the bothy is a hatch set in concrete. Ash grazing their ankles they walk in languorous circles, blinking across a ravaged landscape shrouded in mist.

Tremulous voice breaks the silence. "There's no way back, is there?"

John places a comforting hand on Sylvie's shoulder. "Weapons of mass destruction. Pah!" He strikes a defiant gesture skyward then leans in close to Sylvie as though confiding a secret.

"You survived Solly's curried beans. Didn't you?"

Behind masks their eyes crinkle around the edges.

Solly pores over footbridge bones staring, just staring into a negative print he's ambled across. They congregate by the burn. Doreen picks up a white stone and skims the surface. They watch it sink. Brittle laughter dry as twig, her thoughts abstracted.

"You know. Humankind found a key, trouble is we left the door open."

Sylvie's response is disjointed, a broken streamer hanging in limpid air.

"It wasn't a door we left open ... it was a box."

John bites his lip. Focussed on a high plateau he watches a veil dissipate over steep corries. Doreen engages the stooped figure.

"What do you see, John?"

His throat twists with emotion.

"Beinn Eallair."

Grey snow flakes fall soft on charred earth.