

Knoydart Heartbeat

By Helen Watson (Lost Sheep MC)

"Strange how fast his heart is beating", I thought. My ear was scratching the waterproof jacket as I hugged his chest, his arm around me to warm against the chill wind. We were standing looking out to where sunrays were making pools of mercury on the grey sea between the islands. To Rum, where we had been in the summer, and the strange fin of Eigg. I should have been watching the clouds shift the light, and the mist stroke up against the mountainside. And that moment I was. Almost. But I was also staring at the flat screen in my neon office... and dozing between bent newspapers and empty crisp packets on the stuffy Friday train from Edinburgh, impatient to meet his hot kisses on the station. And then the dark walk to his small flat in Inverness which was always freezing and damp because of the storage heaters so that all we could do was warm each other in bed and draw lines across the folds of Scotland, back and forth, weekend after weekend to see each other or meet in the hills...

On the first day, the walk in, our eyes had been heavy from the week, and later, I lay awake in the dank bothy listening to the whining generator from the cottage next-door, annoyed that this was not the private peace by the glassy loch I had imagined. Just after we'd rounded the last point on the coastal path, a large herd of stags had poured down from the hill, crossing the path in front of us. They raced out onto a promontory and then splashed into the shallows of Barrisdale Bay, creating wobbles in the reflection of the green hillsides. As the sides of the hill lapped at the shore ever more lazily, we'd stood and watched the deer watch us. Both parties in quiet anticipation. I rested on my walking poles, forgetting the rucksack of food and sleeping bag pulling hard on my shoulders, feeling regret at causing them anxiety but wanting to watch for longer. One stag bent down to chew some seaweed, breaking the reflection and the tension. The rest of the herd of antlered heads lowered in unison and we whispered in jest that perhaps they knew we were in the wrong coloured Gore-Tex to have guns.

But it was so strange that then, with the wind aching in my other ear, I could still hear his heart beating through all those layers of clothing. "Perhaps", I thought vaguely, "he's actually a bit exhausted...unlikely though with all that Wednesday fell running ... still the constant weekends seeing each other and late phone calls take up energy". I pushed a strand of hair that was whipping into my eyes back into my hat. The mist was wrapping a little thicker over the ridge, and the mercury waters gleamed palely through wisps drifting in front of them. Grey boulders merged with grey. "What I love most" I thought "is that every moment the light changes". A warm yellow glow on a hill in the distance singled it out from dark ranks.

Just earlier we had climbed up onto the mossy side of Ladhar Bheinn, but I had refused to go on across a steep traverse of spring snow topping the wet bank. A damp lump slithered into pieces down the hill as I walked. Always a wimp, the wet grass was suddenly that under a friend's foot, somewhere else a few summers ago. I stopped in fear, reliving their slip and fall forever.

"Oh come on, it's not that hard" he had called and cajoled, disappointed I knew and I felt bad because it was a long way to come and I wanted to be braver for him. Like him my heart never felt stiller than in the quiet of the hills, but I didn't have his head for heights. Somehow though, we could never make an argument last a long time. "Come, we'll go up Luinne Bheinn instead" he pulled me off the rock that I was a cragfast sheep on and into the shelter of his body, his three-day stubble prickling my face and the toggles from his rucksack digging me hard in the chest. We'd gone along the ridge then, hand in hand talking about plans for the summer holiday in Skye, three whole weeks of being together by the mountains and the sea. Not too long now.

The mist was thinner again and I could see a raven flapping above the boulders on the ridge. A small spot of rain hit me on the cheek and I shivered, hugging tighter into his armpit, but it would not come to much as there was still light shining on the sea. And I said "you know it's strange but your heart's beating so loud that I can hear it".

There was a pause, "That's because there is a question I've been wanting to ask you". And somehow he was on one knee in the wet moss and, in Knoydart, a second heart was beating strong.