

A hell of a walk in...
By Laura Alexander

"That bothy, in November, it's a hell of a walk in on a Friday night!"

The rain trickles down my spine,

Distracting me from the dragging weight of my sodden sack.

In single file we plod across the moor, weaving through peat hags.

I imagine the joy of ditching 5 kilos of coal. Whose idea was this?

Think longingly back to the warm bright chippy,

Golden fish lying curled on its vinegary bed.

Burning my fingers as I tear into it greedily

Cold Irn Bru degreasing my mouth as effectively as any drain cleaner

Then on through the dark, cars low on their springs,

Laden with people, kit and 3 sacks of coal.

At the station, the usual faff, repacking, debating,

Coal decanted into Tesco bags and added to already bulging sacs

The train is another world, busy people heading home

Looking askance as we stand awkwardly in the aisle;

Obstructing the bemused conductor and refreshment trolley.

Brakes squeal, we step out of their lives and into the darkness.

Once again we peer at the map, rehearse the arguments

Rain has started to fall, soft, permeating, West Highland rain.

"Eight miles, first three along the railway line to avoid the bog?"

"That was the last train for tonight, why not?"

We set off, sleepers awkwardly shorter than a natural stride.

The sacks bite into our shoulders, we settle into harness.

Don't think about the distance, just walk.

No sound but our feet on the ballast, no lights but our headtorches

Then, an intrusion from the world we've left behind,
A flurry of sound and light, an unexpected train.
We hurl ourselves from the track, find we are on a viaduct,
Luckily not too high. Plod on amid recriminations
Eventually we leave the railway, head directly for the bothy.
Five more miles. An air of grim determination prevails.
Peat hags, bog treacherously seeded with roots of long dead trees,
The rain insinuating its way into every weakness
A succession of burns to cross, more bog;
Headlight batteries failing, sac compressing my spine.
It must come soon, we have been walking for ever
Through the dark and rain; nothing but more nothing.
Finally trees, still living, and something else, more solid,
Gradually gaining shape. The gable of the bothy.
The door opens smoothly. Silence, deserted; all ours.
Dry musty smell of old fires and dusty wooden floors
We take possession, tip out the much cursed coal and light both fires
Faces lit by flames, hip flasks unearthed, tea brewing.
Insulated by miles of bog and heather from the outside world.
A hell of a walk in... but worth it.