

Acceptance

By James Cassidy

He stopped to catch his breath, and as he did so looked up at the ridge. His experienced eyes automatically picked out the route to the top. Without conscious effort he calculated the quickest way up. The lines of least resistance seemed to leap out at him. He knew where exposure to the wind was greatest, and where the quiet nooks where you could grab a cup of tea in peace were. and could see that tricky point below the summit, and knew how to avoid it. The unthinking, instinctive judgement that comes from years of being on the hills. Not like his first visit here all those years ago. Not long out of school, and barely into work, none of the gang had driven a car back then. He remembered the train journey, all laughter and loud banter, and the city slipping away, the distant hills growing closer and closer. There had been a group of foreign climbers on the train that day, calling out to each other in an unknown tongue, and while the words were not understood, their drunken antics had kept them entertained for half the journey until one by one they had dozed off in an alcoholic haze, their chatter subsiding until the only noise remaining was the clack-clack, clack-clack of the train as it dawdled along.

Then the brakes applied, and they were on the platform watching the red tail lights disappear into the gloom. They had headed off, overly laden with enough supplies to last a week, and by the time they had arrived at the camp, he recalled they had been soaked in sweat, and had been almost eaten alive with midges as they fumbled around trying to put the tents, old French Army canvas ones, designed to be 'squaddie proof'. Lightweight they were not, bulky and heavy but durable. How they had changed since then, his last one had weighed as little as a few bags of sugar, and wasn't much bigger either.

His face burst into a grin as he remembered how he'd slipped the teddy bear into Tam's rucksack on the train, and his bright red face when it had spilled out onto his sleeping bag in front of all the others! "Ah thought ye wid burst" he had cried, tears rolling down his cheeks. They had broken out the beers, cans of something or other, cooled in the burn next to the tents. Charred sausages and beans with beasties and flakes of wood in them. They had inexperience in spades and it showed. They had set off the next morning, and he recalled how none of them could really read a map, and it was more by luck than judgement that they had got to the top in one piece. Scrambling about, trying to catch a view of the top between gaps in the mist, and steering towards it. "Smashing view, eh?" said Kenny sarcastically "Who's daft idea was this anyway?" And with that the wind had carried the cloud onwards, and the last wisps departed and left them with **that** view. The sun on the loch below, and everywhere, at every point of the compass, a seemingly unending sea of hills. Dark peaks and lighter ones, and far off some with snow still clinging on. Round ones and jagged ones, and big great lumps. Turning round and taking it all in, he breathed in the air. Nothing like it. It was free of car fumes, of thick cigarette smoke and the relentless dust of the building site. And he was hooked. As they made their way back down, talk turned to those other hills, and plans began to form. Since then he had done them all. Tick, tick, tick, tick. First one then another, and as their experience grew so did the days. Two, three, four hills a day, each trip had to have more height, more miles. And now, years down the line Kenny had two rounds of Munros, he and Tam one. Hundreds of hills, thousands of miles and God knows how many pairs of boots he had gone through.

But this hill, this was the first and the one he had always come back to.

How many times had he been up there? How could one hill have such a draw, be so magnetic? There had been times that he'd tried to fight the urge to come here.

"No again! You've goat tae widen yer horizons" Tam cried one Thursday in the bar where they met to plan the following weekends excursions. "That map's wore thin, we need to stretch oor imagination a wee bit". And for a long time he had.

The bothy trips, they had been something else. The joys of the 'long walk in' remained in the memory long after the aches had faded. He recalled a few of those walks. One, in the early hours of a spring morning, stood out above them all. Never since could he recall such a sky. Far from the lights of the towns and villages the sky appeared somehow blacker, bigger, more...intense. And what stars! He had experienced plenty of nights before and since on the hills, but that night had been something special. His head had begun to swim as he tried to take it all in. So many, of all intensities, some he had known, the rest, he had no concept of their existence. And just when he thought he could take no more, and that his head would explode trying to take in the vastness of it all a meteor shower had cut across the sky, white tears in the black. Again and again they had tore across the heavens, before dropping off, then ceasing. After a while they realised it was over. Even now he recalled the silence afterwards, so quiet. As though to even breathe would spoil the moment. Then the wind had picked up, the chill reminding them that they had a way to go.

Laden with enough food to feed a small army, they had gathered firewood as they walked, and strapped it to their rucksacks. They had overdone it slightly on one occasion, looking like Birnam Wood as they crossed the moor to the bothy, but that night, as they sat by the fire, laughing and joking, they knew it had been worth it. "There's nae life in a cauld bothy" Tam had remarked. The jokes crackled in synchronicity with the fire, dying off as the flames subsided to a glow and the darkness crept out of the corners to consume the room. The booze worked its way through his system, and he had disentangled himself from his sleeping bag and snuck outside to answer nature's call, to find nature was already up and about. Mist hung above the burn and a stag stared at him for a frozen moment, before turning and bounding off, its white rump flashing up and down, then fading in the early morning haze. Only seconds, inconsequential in the great scheme of things, locked forever in his mind.

He felt the pain in his hip, bringing him back to the present. Looking up at the ridge his emotions swam. He wouldn't be going up there today, or any other day for that matter. Not unless they put a stairlift in he thought to himself. There was no anger though. A touch of jealousy perhaps at the folk who could get up there, but no anger. Years of niggling pain, the tenderness in the knees, the burning in the hip, were the price paid for his memories. He supposed that like others he had just gotten old. He had no major dramas to speak of, nothing worth a book deal or a film. Television and books were always regaling their audience with tales of heroism, or death in far way places. He had no such grand tales to tell, but he'd had a ball while it lasted. Maybe he should give Tam a call later he thought to himself. He couldn't climb these hills any more, but for now at least he still had his pals and his memories. The hills were now as untouchable as the past was. They could look, but not touch. But they could still feel...

"Are you ready Dad?" His daughter stood by the car, the door open for him. "Eh? Oh...aye. Give me a hand will you?" With a grunt he pulled himself up off the bench. She helped manoeuvre him into his seat and did up his seat belt. The car pulled away from the car park, feeding into the traffic heading back to the city. "Cup of tea somewhere?" she said. "Why not. There's a wee pub I used to frequent on the road home. I always liked a beer after a hill. Did I ever tell you about the time..."