

THE FISH LADDER

A Journey Upstream

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B L O O M S B U R Y
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I seemed to have been wandering for hours. I wondered if I had missed the track, which according to the map was about two-thirds of the way along the river's length. Maybe it was a ford, rather than a bridge – and I had passed it, without noticing. The stream was barely more than the span of my arm, and the deer-tracks wandered from one side to the other as the animals sought a straighter path than that of the wriggling stream. I climbed back up onto the heather. A short-eared owl lifted up in front of me with a *he-awe* cry, its black-rimmed eyes as fierce as suns, burning through pale rings, delicate as pansies. The Welsh word for owl means flower-face, after an enchanted woman made from flowers, who was condemned – for her adultery, and for plotting to murder her husband – never to show her face in daylight again. There was no sun now, but neither was it dark, and I tried to dismiss the superstitions linked with the appearance of daytime owls, and to concentrate instead on the fact that short-eared owls are diurnal. After I had passed the spot, the owl returned to its place, and was immediately lost beneath the heather. I walked on. In part I had been unnerved because the owl was sitting on the ground; but there was nowhere else for it – for either of us – to be.

At last I could see the track. It crossed the stream at a bridge made of wooden railway sleepers. There was a square shack with a metal roof and picture windows. As I got closer I saw a kitchen table and some chairs. The stream and the track – two tyre lines across the moor – formed a perfect crossroads. I was still uncomfortable at the thought of being seen. I was too nervous even to put my face to the window of the hut, or to try the door. And yet as soon as I had gone past it, and the stream had curved out of sight of the hut, and out of sight of anyone who might come to it, I felt safe. The transition took moments, not even a minute, because the

dwindling stream was now constantly turning, sometimes leaving crescent moons of still water through the gentle cut. There were no more traps. The cleft prints of the deer were for the most part hard and cracked, the black peat baked by the sun. The grass was longer now, and every so often I came across the pressed, indented shapes that marked the place where deer had rested. A golden frog, with a shiny Murano eye, hopped quickly away into the damp grass by the stream.

A hind came down from the moor to drink, her pale face and large ears tuned inquisitively towards me. Uncertain, she changed her mind, and picked her way back onto the peat hag, head pulled back, one eye swivelled in an attempt to keep me in view. And then she turned, and remained there, her ghostly face suspended, waiting for me to pass. She was the first solitary deer that I had come across although I had seen several herds throughout the day.

An eagle. Like the owl, she too must have been resting on the heather, and I heard her before I saw her. When she gained sufficient height to catch the breeze she curled away, black against the still-white sky, which muffled her *pee-ooow* call, a white band under her tail attesting to her youth.

It was the time of the evening when the creatures move.

I was relaxed as I walked towards the waterhead, although it seemed extraordinary to me that I still hadn't reached it – the stream was so very narrow. I wondered about settling, soon, for the

night, because the boggy water table might not be the most sensible place to sleep. In any case I was hungry. I had apples, chocolate, pumpkin seeds and raisins. And, like *Treasure Island's* Dr Livesey, I carried a block of cheese. I also had the remains of Liz's Rioja in my hip flask. While I was pondering the meal I might make with these things, I heard something.

At first I thought it was an effect of my being alone, a trick my ears were playing caused by the silence of the moor – I wondered if it was tinnitus. But it didn't seem to be coming from inside my head, so I stopped a moment to listen. And as soon as I stopped moving they descended.

Midges!

They filled my eyes, my ears, my nose and mouth with their pointy needle kisses. I breathed them, swallowed them, spat them out, batted at them, and then began to run.

Without ever stopping moving I scanned the ground for somewhere to sleep. A heather-covered ledge had collapsed at the edge of the cut. It was about a yard below the level of the open moor, and yet still a little elevated above the stream. I scrutinised the place as best I could through the stinging cloud. I could see no tracks across it, and found a spot in the middle where I was least likely to be stepped on should a deer descend from the moor in the night. The deer-track along the edge of the stream was around three yards away: I had no desire to find out if *sure-footed as a deer* was a truism.

Having identified my spot, I broke into a furious dance. I pulled off my Wellingtons, pushing them into my bag. I opened out my sleeping bag and wriggled into both it and the bivouac bag before pulling the hoods of both of them over me. I was, mercifully, wearing a muslin T-shirt, and I pulled this over my face like a fencing

mask, before killing every one of the horrid little flies that had so comprehensively invaded my bed.

At last it was over. I drank a sip of water from within the safety of the sleeping bag. It was the only one of my supplies that had made it into the sanctuary. I then rearranged the fencing mask. I could feel a space about the size of a fist under my ribs, but hunger was a small price to pay for being safe from the midges. The whole of my body, face and hands stung with their bites. Earlier, as I walked, I had nursed an image of myself sitting by the stream in the long northern night and reading Neil Gunn's book while eating an apple. The electronic-sounding whine was still at full strength, though; I could not even hear the water. And I couldn't see through the muslin fencing mask. In spite of the early hour – it couldn't have been more than nine o'clock – I pushed my body into the heather, which was soft and springy, and didn't even mark the passage into sleep.

A joyful sound awoke me: rain. A light summer rain, but I was warm and dry and the midges were being washed away. When the rain gave way to silence, I peeped out from beneath my mask, then took it off. The darkness was imperfect, and the gentle bubble of the stream replaced the high-pitched hum. A white mist hugged the water, visible as a light area below me. I drifted off.

I felt him before I saw him. It was as though there was a dial in my stomach and an arrow had spun me back to consciousness, accurate and sensitive as a compass. The needle stalled, quivering, in his direction. He coughed and then shifted his footing, and my nose

burned with pungent musk. Lying very still, I lifted my face. The stag was standing just behind the crown of my head, his own head held high. His antlers filled the darkness over me; it was like looking at the sky through leaded panes. I could make out the deeper darkness of his body but he was too close, and it was too dark, to see his legs. He seemed unsure about what to do and then, sliding back his head in that tight, reined-in gesture that the hind had exhibited earlier, he delicately stepped down onto the track, and whether he stayed to drink or left immediately I will never know, because sleep once again stopped my senses.

I woke soon after dawn. Thick mist filled the streambed. On either side, in the long grass, cobwebs cast about in all directions, weighted with an early catch of rain. I glanced down at my sleeping bag. I too was covered in a pearly veil. I touched my cheek and my hand came away wet. Even my eyelashes were beaded. I was about to turn over and go back to sleep, wait for the sun to burn it off, when I caught myself. How many times would I ever again wake up alone, at dawn, on a Highland moor? And yet I would sleep the day away!

I took off my clothes and wandered around barefoot, feeling the soft moss and cold peat between my toes. I found a flower which looked like edelweiss, but was really a sprig of sphagnum moss that had dried, rehydrated and then dried again so many times that it had petrified. Stalks of drenched bog-cotton formed an army of white-haired witches, partially transformed into their broomsticks. I got dressed and packed away my bed. I was thrilled to see the place where I had been, the crushed heather dark against the dewy whiteness. I looked up and down the streambed, as

though for someone or something with whom to share my excitement at this concrete mark of my existence. But I was alone with the impassive moor. And yet the fact that it was clearly so very much alive reassured me. Made me glad.

I picked up my bag and broke through the cobwebs, feeling certain that the source was close. I smiled at my lack of faith in bringing such a quantity of bottled water to the source of a river.

The stream disappeared into a muddy hole in the ground. Or, rather, it emerged. It hadn't got any narrower. There was no bubbling spring, no crystal well. Just a navel oozing primordial soup: viscous and green. The water seeped, rather than flowed. One half of the damp oval was covered in grass, the height of a finger, preternaturally bright.

There was absolutely nothing there.

I suppose that made sense. That there *was* nothing there. It was the source. Embryonic. The beginning. Although my spirits had sunk when I saw it. I knew that I was fighting to make something out of the discovery, because this was nowhere near the Well at the World's End I'd come to look for. I sat down. I had a flask of hot water, and some sachets of coffee, sugar and milk that I'd taken from the hotel the night before. I made myself a cup and drank it, broke off a piece of chocolate, and all the while gazed at the hole.

The mist blew past in gauzy fragments, sometimes closing, sometimes lifting, and I couldn't really see what lay beyond. I didn't want to move away from the navel. Since reaching the water table the ground had levelled off. I was afraid of getting lost if I left the indentation of the streambed. I was in no hurry to move on.

I took out *Highland River* from my backpack. I still hadn't got beyond the opening chapters. I flicked to the end.

His dismay was vague and ludicrous. From his map-gazing he knew that his river should rise in a loch. He could not have been mistaken . . . And here it was coming out of the earth itself. The realism mocked him.

Vague and ludicrous . . . I took out the map and opened it. I peered at it very closely. There was no loch. I returned to the book.

He went on over the broken ground and came to a round still pool . . . About him the ground was broken and hag-ridden, but he could see he had not yet reached the crest of the watershed. There remained the suggestion of an upward hollow. He came on another small pool like the first. Then another. A primeval no man's land of out-spewings like water-logged shell holes . . . And then all at once before him again was the tiny stream and lifting his eyes he saw the far half of the loch, Loch Braighe na h'Aibhne, the water-head.

I picked up the map again. Stared at it. Yes, the stream *did* disappear, and that could be it re-emerging at the very edge of the page. But there was no loch. I glanced at the back cover of the book as it rested on a peaty knoll. Saw the word *Fiction* in the bottom left-hand corner. Again I scrutinised the map: *Braighe na h'Aibhne* was there, but it described a collection of small pools on the high ground to the south. They looked like a collection of dubh lochs. The book was first published in 1937. Could the loch have disappeared? Was this the result of global warming? Had it sunk into the peat as though through a sponge?

The mountain of Morven that had been hard and bright all afternoon, its scree and growths now clearly defined, was gathering about it an imponderable blue.

There was no mountain marked on my map, and no mountain visible before me. I was puzzled by the discrepancies between the novel, the Ordnance Survey map, and the place in which I found myself. The mist continued to blow in ragged wisps and I contemplated turning back. This hole in the ground was of limited interest, especially after I had read of a hard bright mountain and a non-existent loch, its shores *of pure ground quartz, paler than any woman's face in any old poet's dream*. I could try to pick up the stream again, as did the character in the novel, but I was wary of setting out over the moor now that a danger more real than the inconvenience of getting lost in mist had occurred to me. That is, the possibility of drowning in the bog. And it would mean walking off the edge of my map. I wanted to cry with frustration.

But I didn't. It was still early in the morning. I was ravenously hungry. I made a meal of cheese, apples, raisins and chocolate, and drank the water that I was happy to have brought with me. I packed away the book and map and sat down on the peaty knoll. It was a summer morning in August. I unscrewed the cap of my hip flask and sipped the chilly, slightly metallic, Rioja.

Half an hour later the sun had chased off the mist. The wide bowl of the watershed became visible for the first time. It was filled with heather, and pocked with little pools. The land was still rising, faintly, and there appeared to be a ridge along one edge of the bowl. I stepped out of the crease that held the river and headed for the ridge.

I was anxious as I made my way over the open ground, and kept looking behind me for the dip in the land that marked the head of the strath. Every so often I came across another pool, and circumvented it with anxiety. I couldn't find any deer-tracks and this, too, worried me. And then I stopped, because I could hear a sound I had heard before, a sound like an indrawn breath. Water. A sudden diversity of bright vegetation confirmed the path of the stream. It was flowing just beneath my feet, just beneath the ground, towards the place where I had come from. I followed the sound, bent low so I could hear. Soon I could see it: a trickle barely a hand-span in width. It was leading me towards the ridge. I glanced back to the neck of the valley, anxious lest the mist return. But the visibility held. At the edge of the plateau was a fringe of reeds, and I stepped up onto a bank of peat, before stumbling at the sight before me.

A loch!

The loch. Its surface, soft as pewter, mirrored the clouds. Salt-white boulders lined a powdery shore of crystal sand, unmarked and clean, its whiteness stained to the colour of cork by the peat. Nothing disturbed the water, not a ripple, not a fly. I was choked by its loveliness; my senses flooded. As I watched, the low clouds shifted, lifted, and there, beyond the farthest shore, was the slate-green flank of a mountain. So this was Morven! The sky behind the clouds was as pale as a thrush's egg and the surface of the loch took this new palette for its own. I could see the scree, the grassy slopes, the dark outlines of trees and rocks pencilled in by their elongated shadows. But the vision was momentary and a cloud passed over the mountain, cowlng the peak, rearranging the features of the slopes, covering up the sun. My eye returned to the loch. Without the bright reflection I could see to the bottom. The powdered quartz continued beneath the water, a few looping

tea-coloured tide-marks as it deepened, the occasional shard of bright white rock. Loch Braighe na h'Aibhne. I sat down on the bank overhanging the shore, my feet dangling above the water, not wanting to spoil its surface.

I don't know how much time passed, but suddenly I felt that I must go. I hadn't swum, or drunk the water, or even walked around the loch. I had presumed, when I first arrived, first knew that it was true, that I would swim to the centre, inhabit the water, make it my own, and yet even as my fingers began to tug at my clothes I knew that it was not going to happen. I straightened my clothing. The strongest sense had settled on me, concrete as the mist that covered the mountain, that, if I once disturbed the surface, or entered the water, I would upset a balance both chemical and physical. I didn't even want to contemplate how long it might take before the stillness of the loch could be recovered.

And yet the rain must do it all the time.

I picked up a handful of the quartz sand and poured it into my pocket, over the silky green hazelnuts that I still had from yesterday. I turned away from the loch and retraced the tiny stream, and this seemed straightforward now, despite its passing underground, and it led me back to the funnel of the valley and the muddy oval where the river re-emerged. It was surprisingly easy walking.

I was following in my footprints, and wondering how long they would remain there, when I was struck by the idea that something was passing, or had ended. I tried to push the feeling away from me, and for the most part I was successful, though I was unable to

dismiss it entirely. I again passed the place where I had spent the night, but the dew had vanished and the heather regained its shape. There was nothing to suggest I had ever been there.

I disturbed the eagle, still in her place, and was again unnerved by the owl. The deer came and went as they had throughout my trip. There was no sign of the golden frog. A black seabird rose above me and followed me, crying. I supposed it to be an Arctic skua, we were far enough north, and it remained with me for half an hour, adhering to the path of the stream, and then it circled back across the moor, calling, calling, as though I were a fishing boat and we were at sea, and some good might come from following me. Or perhaps it was curiosity, a desire for companionship, the fascination of living things for one another.

I re-entered the part of the river where the traps were set, and paid careful attention to my footing. But my thoughts ran on independently, looping back now to the loch, and to my decision not to swim. Swimming was one of my passions, one of the ways by which I defined myself. Knew myself. I was also surprised that I had not drunk from it. The idea that had brought me here was the idea that there might just be a well at the end of the world, full of wisdom, and answers, and that I might go and look for it. A lot of the stories associated with the well were about forbidden love. The attempt to explain away, or to cover over, children born of what were often single encounters. Even the miraculous story of the birth of Taliesin – born to an enchantress who had swallowed him whole, while he was a grain of corn, and she was a hen – could be interpreted as a ripping yarn to explain away the need to name a father. Why else would his mother have thrown him into the sea? Then there was the paternity of St Finan Cam of Kintitty, he whose mother successfully maintained that she had been

impregnated by a salmon – a big fish tale if ever there was one. St Kentigern’s mother claimed her son was miraculously conceived, although his biographer Jocelyn of Furness would have none of it, stating firmly that *that which was born in her womb she received from a human embrace*, although he speculated that she may perhaps have *taken the drink of oblivion*, and therefore been genuinely unable to put together, or to believe, what had happened to her.

Isak Dinesen wrote: ‘Love, with very young people, is a heartless business. We drink at that age from thirst, or to get drunk. It is only later in life that we occupy ourselves with the individuality of our wine.’ Lovemaking is indeed a heartless business for anyone other than the lovers. It annihilates, blinds, burns, bruises, chokes, consumes, crushes, devours, destroys – and I have only reached D. Cupid pierces our hearts with an arrow, orgasm is a little death. Love is not about personal responsibility, or being considerate of other people’s feelings. Love is impulsive, compulsive, addictive. Lovers are selfish, and can be infuriatingly self-righteous, so that more or less anything is felt to be excusable if it is done in the name of love. Consequences have never come into it.

*A secret well there was
from which gushed forth every kind of mysterious evil.
There was none that could look to its bottom
But his two bright eyes would burst:
If he should move to left or right,
He would not come from it without blemish.
Therefore none of them dared approach it . . .*

The day unravelled slowly and I followed the thickening ribbon until it again became a brook. I passed the almost ornamental

waterfall as it stepped past Poll Roy, and saw it fortified by the tributary at the boundary of the enclosed land, where it once again regained the character of a river. I recovered the Land-Rover track, and the road reasserted itself. I experienced a sense of homecoming as I stepped onto it.

At the farm I came across a rabbit: beheaded and gutted, and left out on the path. I wondered if it was the blind rabbit from yesterday, but could read nothing into the blackening mess, except that a ghillie had been there, and had left the carcass to fatten the hawks against the winter. Soon I was able to make out the cemetery, white as sugar on the green-gold moor. The spidery tombstones again appeared to move.

When I was below the cemetery a glint of light drew my eye. Looking at the place where it had been I caught a second flash, as though someone were signalling across the moors. I listened hard, but could hear nothing above the rustle of the wind, the anxious spill of skylarks. I had regained the place where birds sang. And then a bounced movement: a four-wheel drive was curling up the road; I could hear the constricted voice of an engine in low gear. There were two men inside, one dressed like a country gent, the other in a donkey jacket and woolly hat. They pulled up alongside me.

‘Good afternoon!’ said the country gent.

‘Good afternoon,’ I replied.

‘Are you walking to Dunbeath?’ he asked. When I nodded he told me that they were going to play the pipes for an old friend in the cemetery, and that if I’d like to accompany them they could run me back to the town when they were done.

‘Thank you, that’s really kind. But I’ve walked all the way from the sea to the loch. If you don’t mind, I’d really like to finish the journey on foot. It’s only a few more miles.’

‘The loch?’

‘Yes. Loch Braighe na h’Aibhne.’ I had no idea how to pronounce the Gaelic.

‘There’s a loch?’

‘Yes.’ And I pointed to the moor. ‘Up there.’

‘Well, do you know, I have lived here all my life and I never knew there was a loch!’ He turned to the other man, and I missed what he said, but I felt a perfect bubble of delight, because I knew that my journey had been special, and I thanked them again, and bid them goodbye, and continued on my path. When I got to the place where the track bent I glanced back towards the cemetery. I watched the two men search for the key and unlock the iron gate. The man in the donkey jacket raised his pipes; but the wind was against them and all I could hear were the summer bees and the river. In less than an hour I had reached my car, but I continued beyond it, beneath the stone bridge and the boomerang-shaped viaduct, past a dozen or so fishermen’s cottages. As I approached the harbour I saw two lovers on a wooden bench, caught in the net of their own arms and legs, their noses almost touching. The tips of their fingers wandered, collecting information, each about the other, as much as their senses could withstand. And then behind them, high above the water, came a flick of silver, a comb of falling droplets, and the arching, turning body of a salmon. It must have entered the river mouth, even as I had reached it. *Did you see?* I wanted to cry to the lovers. *Did you see it?* But of course they didn’t, their eyes were closed. But I saw, and my heart filled at this coincidental, timely fish.

It was evening when I got back to the hotel. I had walked thirty miles in the last two days. Then driven two hours back. Although

I had felt almost fluid in Dunbeath, my summer body loose as willow, I ached as I walked from the car park to the lobby, my limbs stiffening in the evening chill. One toe throbbed. I suspected I would lose the nail. The young barman Callum entered the lobby, and without saying a word picked up my holdall and headed up the stairs. At the landing he turned towards the grand rooms at the front of the house and I paused, confused, for I was very much aware of our last interchange. My room had been at the top of the hotel. Realising that I was no longer following him, he also stopped, and turned to me:

‘They said you’d gone to follow a river to its source. We said *well, if that’s the case, then that lassie’s going to be wanting a hot bath . . .*’

I suddenly felt like a warrior queen, from long ago, coming home triumphant from a battle. Callum opened the door to what was probably the best room in the house, and put down my bag; he then nodded towards an open door. There had been no bathroom in the old room, just the communal bath beneath the eaves; but I could already see the lip of a roll-top bath and a pile of fluffy white towels.

‘Would you like me to set your table in the bar?’

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘That would be grand.’