

Excerpt from Belmont House

Alec set the two of them down at the place where the path went up from the road and Moira's father lifted a hand to the departing van.

From the van's cabin, sitting between the men and with her mother's green knapsack on her lap, Moira had thought the day outside looked still and clear. But out here on the roadside the wind lifted at her woollen coat and the path ahead looked as though it was leading to a cold place.

'Right then,' said Stanley, 'Get your bag on and off we go. Boots feel alright?'

The boots were Moira's mother's and too big by a size or two, but back at the house they'd padded them out with thick socks. Still, her toes roamed about inside. Nice, though, to wear her mother's leather hiking boots, to draw their tops tight around her ankles with the red laces which needed looped round metal cleats; not like children's shoes at all. The day before, her mother had kept her back once the younger children had said their goodnights, to offer her the loan of them, just for the day; 'I know you won't mention it to Alison,' she had said, 'You know how Alison would be about it.' And Moira had known exactly how Alison would be about it and so had waited for Granny to take the lamp out of their bedroom that night and then had hissed, 'I'm going up the mountain with Dad tomorrow and you've to stay here with Ewan *and I'm going to get to wear Mum's boots.*'

They set off along the path. It lifted up steep and was difficult underfoot and Moira began to feel her breaths come heavy. 'Put your hands on your hips when you're walking,' said her father. 'It'll open up your lungs.' Under the trees here, it felt like there wasn't a lot of air. The ground was thick with leaves, rocks hidden here and there below, and it seemed that the shedding branches overhead and the forest carpet underneath were sucking the air in their own directions so that you, caught, ended up in a thin zone in between.

They came out of the trees to the burn. The rocks stood silver and pink against the earth, the grey sky high overhead smoothing the water flat and glossy. They had to follow the path up beside the burn and then, higher up, find a place to cross; this she'd heard about in the van, Alec asking her father over the engine's clamour where they planned to make the crossing. 'We'll cross after Caisteal Corrach,' Stanley had said, 'Plenty of big rocks to get your feet on, there.'

'Won't the water be on the high side?' Alec had said, but her father had brushed this away and begun talking about having fished near Caisteal Corrach after the war and brought home a salmon for Moira's mother which Granny had turned her nose up at having in the old flat in Glasgow. 'The woman didn't know what she was missing,' the story had ended. 'What a piece of fish that was.'

'Dad,' said Moira now, 'When you took home that fish for Mum, why did Granny turn her nose up at it?'

Her father took his time to reply. 'Well, her story would be that I'd poached the fish. She wanted to put it in the bin.'

'What do you mean, poached it?'

'She'd have said that I didn't have a licence from the landowner to fish on the river. She'd have said you weren't allowed the fish unless you had a licence. That's what she'd mean by poaching.'

Moira imagined a father, ten years younger, handsome then, maybe, stealing a fish from a river in the middle of the day. They walked on and then her father said, ‘She preferred to go hungry, she told us, and your mother had to go and cook it in the neighbours’ kitchen because we weren’t to sully the stove in ours. But God, it was tasty. You should have seen it.’ He laughed. ‘You did see it. You were there, a baby. Enough for us and the neighbours across the hall and upstairs too.’

‘Did I eat it?’ said Moira.

‘I should think so,’ said Stanley. And then he began on a story about Uncle Dougie who had been fishing up on Lewis for a salmon to take home to his wife, and in the darkness the factor had come shouting across the moor with a torch towards Dougie and his friend, and they had had to run and leave their fishing gear and had jumped down into a ditch to hide in the dark but on the way down into the ditch Uncle Dougie had fallen and snapped a tendon and they’d lain in the ditch with Uncle Dougie trying not to scream for the rest of the night and hadn’t been caught. Perhaps this was what happened on mountains. Talk, stories – not the same ones you were given down at ground level.

They came to the place where they were to cross the burn and the water roared downhill, boiling white and deep where it sucked and boomed against rocks mid-stream. The step down from the bank to the surface was steep and it was quite far to reach a foot before you would get it onto a good steady stone out there in the flow. ‘You’ll have to hop over here at the first bit,’ said Moira’s father, and showed her. The first stone he landed on stood firm but the second wobbled as he put his foot upon it and he had to reach for another; for an unsettling moment it looked as though he might go in. But he didn’t, and on the other side he waited for Moira to come across.

The knapsack felt askew on her shoulders and the too-big boots, tight though they were around her ankles, presented something of a worry; it had become apparent on the path

that her toes continued to move inside at every step, which meant she wasn't really in a position to know where each foot might end up. The water churned and the stone on which her father had first landed gleamed slippily; his legs, long and capable, had made the long first step look a ducking, easy thing and over the other side now his face was arranged into the smooth and open form it always took when he was tying Ewan's school laces, crouching down and making the laces poking out all mice – *and this is where the mouse goes in its hole, up and under.*

She stretched her right leg down and felt herself freeze in that moment of walking out over the water: it rushed below. But her boot found a steady spot on the first stone and the other boot had room to join it. 'Well done,' said Stanley over the rush, 'Now watch out and don't take that one there for granted,' meaning the one he'd nearly wobbled off from. She struck out the other way and stood on a brown stone halfway across. The water rolled across it as waves did when you were jumping over their frilled edges at the beach, when you could see that the water coming there was soft, soft and not like to push you off and under after all. It was a thrill, this crossing game, and the next step and the next came easier until she had hold of her father's hand and was coming up off the final stone to stand beside him on the grassy other side.

'It wasn't too much water at all,' said Moira. 'It wasn't much bother once you got going.'

'Alec's an old woman,' said her father.

The path rose straight up after the burn and Moira's legs began to hurt. She registered a worm of a thought of an *are we nearly there*, but before that worm escaped her lips her father reminded her there were scones for the top, to have with the flask of tea. 'The best cup of tea you'll have, you know. Tea on the mountain is the best cup of tea you'll have.'

'At school,' said Moira, 'I sometimes would like a cup of tea at lunch time.'

‘That’s because you’re nearly grown up.’

Her father chanted a song to keep them going which he had learned in the war. *I had a good job for thirty bob and I left*, it went, and on *left*, whenever it came, you put your left foot on the ground. Imagine a hundred men putting their left feet on the ground all at one time – that was what the war was like.

On and up they went, and the prospect of the scones pushed them on. Granny had baked this morning, filling the house with the scones’ sugar smell while Alison sat in a huff by the stove, kicking her shoes against her chair legs and thinking of unkind things to do to Ewan. Alison’s eyes had flashed under her brow over there and when, at the very last minute, their father had come in and said, ‘That’s Alec coming up the drive,’ she had made a final desperate attempt and pulled out from the corner her schoolbag which, she said, was full of extras for the picnic and which she would be carrying to the top for them. As Moira and Stanley had got into the van it had been possible to hear Alison still raging away inside, and Granny shushing at her still; there was an unaccountable moment then when Moira had wished for a second that Alison would be allowed to come. But then what about Ewan, who couldn’t be left behind quite the baby.

The land beneath them opened out, and far below could be seen the long silver curve of the loch, a brown belt at its edges where the trees came down to the shore. The wind began to lift as they came around the front of the hill. It was a north wind, said Stanley, and this part of the path exposed them to it; it made the going hard and the air seemed to crush and crush at Moira’s face, her hair spreading back flat on her head so that she realised her coat wasn’t any help, really, since it was made of a million needle holes and all of these were things the wind existed to find and get through. But the top was ahead now and this was the exciting bit, the reason that Alison had not been allowed to come: there was towards the top a change in the way the mountain had been formed so that, on the very sweep of its neck, there

came a jagged ridge. From here, the path became a narrow place of safety, over the danger and on to the top.

When Moira had gone in to her mother's room to show her the fit of the boots that morning and had sat on the edge of the bed, her mother had put a hand out from under the blankets and gripped her forearm; the knuckles grasped, blue and bony. 'When we went up years ago, your father and me, the mist came down while we were on the ridge.' Moira had picked up the hand and put it over her, lying down on her side to curl up in front of her mother's body, both faces pointing the same way and her mother's sharp outline pressing out against her own warm shape.

'If the mist comes down,' said her mother then, and Moira felt the buzz from her mother's chest against the rise of her own hair on the pillow behind her, 'you need to just sit down and wait. Do you hear me? Just sit there, and wait. You wouldn't be sitting long. The mist always lifts again.'

They had lain together there until Moira's booted feet, sticking out prone from the bed to preserve the blankets, had got too heavy and she'd swung herself upright. Her mother's breath jarred when the mattress dipped, and across her face came a blank pain so that she no longer looked like anyone's idea of a mother but like one of the marble busts in Kelvingrove Museum. 'See you tonight,' said Moira, and her mother said, 'Have fun, Mouse.' She had left her mother lying with her face towards the shiny walnut surface of the pot cupboard, on top of which still rested the swan-shaped crystal vase out of whose open mouth came forth the reddest leaves Moira and Ewan had been able to collect on their walk home from school on Thursday.

So, approaching the jagged parts now, it was good to see the sky stay still and high. And now it came to it, the ridge was like the crossing of the burn – not so bad as all that. Her father strode ahead and Moira put her boots on the dry stone, the scrunch of sand and

gravelled earth grinding deep up into their soles and connecting her to the ground. Below – thrilling – the edges of the mountain drove down harsh to a corried basin on the right. To the left, at the very bottom, the moorland began and here and there could be seen a road skiting across it. Past that, much further, came the northern hills which, all the way north there, rose up to form the real heights. This mountain was only their smallest beginning. And Moira picked her way on, always behind her father who sprang along and up – lighter up there than he looked when he walked along the ground at home-level, when he was always on his way to do something, to fix or look or talk.

In places on the ridge, the sides of the mountain shrank away, leaving you an ant on top of nothing. The wind chose those places to make you small against it. It circled from behind, beside, and Moira felt her shoulders turned by it and had to crouch down low to put her whipping hair all inside her hat, although the hat felt that it too would come away in the thrash of it all.

Her father didn't turn around again until they came near the summit cairn which, after all the sky and narrowness to here, sat dully on the top of three plain humps of hill. He got there first and placed a hand on the topmost stone. 'What a view,' he said when she arrived. 'All the way north. We've been lucky.' The wind still blinked at Moira's eyes but, now that she could look for real instead of just half-glimpses between careful steps, she saw that all around her feet like a clock face lay the world below.

They put their backs to the wind and had their picnic. Up here it was her father who handed out the scones and made the tea. He stirred in the sugar with a flick of the spoon's bowl and the tin cups rang out in a way which, down in their own kitchen, their Granny would not suffer. The tin of the cup was too hot but the thing to do was hold it near the lips against them turning blue, until it cooled.

And it was cold. ‘Nothing like tea at the top of a mountain,’ said Stanley as they huddled. ‘With everything that you can see, and it keeping you warm while you see it.’ And he lit his pipe and its smoke embraced them, tendrils of it whipping off out into the wide air, and they sat in its comfort, staring out, hearing the rocks beneath them tell their stories.

When the cold became too much, Stanley said, ‘Get yourself up and have a last look.’ Moira got up, turning the whole way round to take it in. Her father must have seen something about her that he liked in that moment because he gripped her, standing behind, his arms coming down over her shoulders and taking each other around her waist, his beard, as he kissed the top of her head and left his chin there a moment, giving off the morning pipe smell which the kitchen always kept. So they stood and looked and Moira, much later, thought often of this happiness at the top.

Together, they saw that the sky had changed and clouds cloaked the body of the tops to the north. But against the day the weather seemed a plain thing to think of, and they began down, Stanley whistling his way back across the summit humps towards the ridge. The wind fell while they went, and the air took on a tinge of candyfloss, a catch of damp, which felt something like that trapped place they’d been through under the trees at the very bottom.

Just as they were about to come again to the sharp parts of the ridge, the mist came down. Moira had never seen such a thing and was, to begin with, enchanted: from the huge world under the sky on which she’d been an ant, she became bigger – the biggest thing, a black pillar against a grey wall – so her father looked, five steps ahead. The sounds of the mountain sucked themselves in as though a balloon had burst and taken all the noise with it.

It was still possible to see her feet as she moved them down, and her father, just ahead, kept his own feet going. But Moira’s boots no longer crunched dry against the grains now the ground had soaked up the mist, and every slab or rock and smooth-edged stone began to glisten and to slide. Over to the left, where surely before had come the sweeping

fall to the corrie, it was a dream of white and tendrils, like fingers lit and speckled by the air as they curled past.

Moira came up behind her father who had stopped and was casting his face around in the mist. Droplets had formed on the shoulders of his jacket, shining. ‘Well then,’ he said. ‘We’ve got it come down on us after all. What do you think about that?’

‘It feels like it’s just me and you only in the world,’ said Moira.

‘Your mother will have kittens when we tell her about it.’

‘She told me about when you were up here together in the mist. She said we’d to sit down and wait if it happened again.’

‘Ah, no need for that,’ said her father. ‘We’ll maybe just not tell her about it.’

‘She was a bit worried,’ said Moira.

‘Never you mind worrying and your mother,’ said her father. ‘Come on then. I’ve got you. Down we go.’ He began again and Moira, following, felt in the tunnel of cloud a deepening, mist upon mist, only the tread of boot and the sniff of breath – down and on they went. And then perhaps she had slowed a bit, too careful on the hard parts where knees became useful for what seemed the first time, locking in just so and the next foot going where it needed to – because her father disappeared and she stood alone in the world.

‘Dad!’

She called for him, but he was gone, on and down, silent below. A picture occurred: him, tumbling, silent. Down and down.

She waited, and called again. The mountain underneath her feet had seen all this before; she felt it coming up through her soles. Down and down. She would be alone here on its shoulders.

She sat on a wet rock, black and square underneath her. She fused herself to it. Behind it, maybe, the edges fell away and down to nothing.

To be alone – her fault. Oh, her fault, and when the mist lifted she would find only a hat or a pipe. The thought rose from her stomach: down and down he had gone, and her alone; useless. And at home her mother from her bed would say *and now all of you will be alone* – her fault.

She called and called for her father and inside the mist her calling came back at her like a cobweb, clouding into her face. Her mouth filled more and more with it each time she gave out his name. And such a long time it felt, each second in the white dark, each silence between the forming of the word that mattered; then the name itself becoming longer, becoming worse, growing and growing out to swallow up the mouth that spoke it.

She heard her voice begin to lose its power. Soon there would just be the silence of being here, knowing he was gone. Once the silence came she would die: or become the mist, be taken by it. Already the mist was settling on her, outside and in; it dripped from her eyes.

‘Dad!’ she called, the last letter of it fastening shut, and she knew it was the end.

But she heard footsteps, and then she breathed, and then he emerged out of the mist. Black first, then his own colours, the brown of his wool jacket, the grey of his hat, peering towards her then standing over her, not two feet away. Here, alive. She looked down for his boots, solid on the mountain.

‘I thought you’d gone!’ said Moira.

‘Not at all,’ said her father. ‘You were just a bit slow, that’s all. Come on, now. Up you get, and we’ll go on.’

‘But you’d gone,’ said Moira. On her rock, with him returned to her, her breath was coming back. She felt the patient lichen underneath her creeping out its wetness, slow and safe. ‘Can we not stay until the mist lifts?’

‘Ah, behave. Come on now. Time to go. Up you get.’

But, slow and safe, she sat. ‘Please, Dad. Let’s wait.’

Her father took a kind tone, which floated across the air between them. ‘We’ll go down. You’ll see, it’s fine. The mist will lift in a bit and we’ll be fine again. Like it was at the top. You’ll see the path, the way we’re going. The views.’ He stepped in towards her and put a hand on her forearm.

But Moira thought of her mother and of that final, closed calling of her father’s name. She sat on her rock and looked at him, full of his image, and thought of him tumbling, and of his pipe on the mountainside. ‘Dad, please. Please can we wait.’ She felt the mist at her eyes again, and on her shoulders, bearing down and in.

The kind tone drove off into the grey. ‘Listen, Madam. You don’t say no to me. Do you think I don’t know what’s best? Get up.’ He gave her arm a wrench.

She did not stand up.

‘Get up.’ He pulled at her, both his arms snatching and hauling. He lifted her halfway onto her feet but she became a rag doll and crumpled back down onto her rock.

‘Please, Dad,’ she said.

‘Up.’ He pulled at her again, and again she sat back down.

And he came in again and again, and the mountain and the mist watched as he began to tower and circle and tear at her, and Moira cried as the smell of his wet coat danced in and out, his feet stepping forward to grab at her then back again to take his breath and rage and whisper and tell her things.

‘Your tears are no good here. Are we listening to your mother in her sick bed down there and useless to all of us?’

His feet made a terrible grinding and sliding on the wet mountain, and she felt the justice of it all: that she, crossing him like this, should cause his death – for he would go over, the mountain would take him from her. But even now, even had she wanted to, she would not get up. She would hold at the centre. She would sit, and wait.

And then her father paused above her and stared at her with white and frightening eyes. Through the droplets hanging between their faces she saw a knot in his throat working beneath his jaw and he said, ‘What good do you think it’ll do you when she’s dead to take her side?’

She heard those words from him and knew them to be true. But, even now, the figure in the bed was watching on with her and saying *but this is only the beginning of the hardness – now you can begin*. She put her arms over her head and made herself a part of the mountain. She would wait until she was ancient, until she was rock.

In that terrible blindness she felt him circling at her still, although he did not speak again. Air moved around her head, then seemed to start to thicken, and move more slowly. His feet ground out their noise still, then quieted at last. After that there came his shuddering breath, and then the sound of matches. Pipe smoke wrapped the two of them against each other and Moira took her head out from under her arms and rubbed her eyes on her coat sleeves while they waited unspeaking in the mist.

When it lifted, not ten minutes later, Moira and her father stood up and began on the walk down. The descent was speedy. The world came out bright again below them and the wind came back up and all that Moira heard, the whole way down, was boots against the ground.

Alec, waiting at the bottom with the van, asked about the burn. ‘You were right, man,’ said her father. ‘A touch on the high side.’