

## In the Passing

*You hardly know yourself. Day follows night, light then dark. There is food, of a kind, fluid through a straw. There is pain, sometimes intense, and occasional relief. There is kindness, pity, indifference. There is the girl.*

Death took Murdo McGregor as the sun rose. He went fighting, knocking the bedside clock across the room and entangling himself in the sheets as if preparing his own shroud.

It is Alison who finds him. At seven thirty she takes his breakfast tray, knocking several times before calling his name and tentatively pushing open the door.

He isn't her first, but still. She stoops to pick up the clock. 4.30am. As if someone stopped the time as he crossed the finishing line of an eighty-year race. *Och, Murdo.* She's not a crier but she sits on the bed, takes his hand and tries to remember his living presence: a son, a husband, the retired stationmaster, a canny shinty player in his day. Beside them Murdo's wife, taken by cancer five years earlier, smiles warmly from a photo frame, her arms wrapped around an eager-faced collie. Sparing her this final view of her husband, Alison lays the photograph facedown then pulls the communication cord.

She hears Jean from a distance, the sound of stockinged thighs moving at speed, the *ching* of keys swinging from a coiled plastic cord. 'Has he passed?' she asks as she enters. She has a cartoon mouth: a resting straight line that varies in frequency according to the occasion and, when Alison nods, it wobbles sadly. Dead, thinks Alison. Not passed, dead. She looks at the floor and chews her bottom lip to avoid saying it. Mistaking it for grief Jean says, 'they can't go on forever, love,' and pats her on the arm. 'Get yourself a tissue.'

She'd seen a film once, one of those old ones they show on a Saturday afternoon when no-one's really watching, in which the journey to the afterlife involved a long, slow ascent on a stone escalator, accompanied by a foppish Frenchman. In optimistic moments Alison likes to think that's how it is, everyone who dies on a particular day rising slowly on an escalator, chatting about their lives until greeted at the top by a stern woman with immaculate hair and an eye for their wing size. But life's not a Saturday matinee. In reality dead means dead and you can dress it in any words you like, but the bottom line is your gone and you're not coming back.

Jean lets go of Murdo's wrist, then presses her fingers lightly on

his eyelids. 'Not unexpected,' she says at last, 'I'll let the doctor know, then, once he's happy, you can help me prepare the body. Are you back on shift later?'

'This evening, until nine.'

'Not the best start to your day is it? Still, it's all part of the job.' She turns back to the bed, patting the dead man's leg. 'Now, Murdo, you wait here, and don't be getting up to any nonsense while we're away.' Then, pulling the sheet over his head, she ushers Alison from the room, locking the door securely behind them.

*Mostly it is women who come, focussed and efficient. You are a task to be completed. You are bed sore relief, catheter care. If you could speak you might say 'thank you,' you might say 'enough now,' you might say 'stay with me, I'm frightened.'*

They work quickly, removing and storing the teeth, taping the wedding ring, running a comb through what remains of the hair and sponging down the body. They tag his leg and wrist with his name and date of birth, then wrap him in a sheet; his 'good suit' will accompany him to the undertakers. They talk to him as they work, soft words and reassurances; hearing, they say, is the last sense to go. Alison won't tell Kyle about this, it's the kind of thing that creeps him out. He says she's too young to be working with old folk, that she would be better off at the nursery in Grantown, playing with the kiddies. 'It's like reading the last two pages of a book,' he says when she tries to tell him about her work, 'jumping to the last page before you've had chance to enjoy the story.' Sometimes, she worries that he might be a bit of an arse.

*You cannot trust your body. There are spasms, painful cramps. Sometimes you hear laughter and yet there's no-one in the room. Yesterday, you woke to find a stag beside your bed, drinking from the water jug, its antlers dripping velvet. You cannot trust your mind.*

By the time she returns for the evening shift, Murdo's body has been removed, his room cleaned, and the bed linen replaced in readiness for a new occupant. All that remains is the photograph of his wife which someone has propped beside the door; she'll take it to the office once she's finished. This is the hard part, not the death, or the preparation of the body, but the recognition of how quickly a person can be erased, first their belongings and then their memory. In two days'

time another man will occupy this room, possibly angry, certainly bewildered, until it becomes his turn to make space. Best not to think too much.

It takes at least an hour to assist the residents into bed and ensure that they are comfortable. Alison always works the same way: from the far end of the corridor towards the rooms beside the office, leaving Donald-John's room until last. He's already in bed, permanently so now that he is in the final stages of the disease. She's known him for a year, since before the symptoms got so bad; an angry man at first, who hardly spoke unless to complain. It was her interest in his job that won him round, the stories he could tell about the area where they'd both grown up, the mountains, the lochs and the wildlife. She enters quietly, sits beside him on the mattress. 'How are you tonight, Donald-john?' There's a tumbler of water on the cabinet and she holds the straw to his lips, urging him with her expression to drink. "Murdo died today,' she says. 'Do you remember Murdo? Room twelve? Just slipped away in his sleep.' She watches his throat constrict, feels the effort of it through his body. She checks the catheter bag then moves to the window. A blackbird, foraging beneath the cotoneaster, startles and *chacker-chack-chacks* toward the river. She turns back to the room, a silhouette now. 'Have you noticed how light it is?' she asks. 'It's the solstice, longest day of the year.' She watches his face, smooth and unresponsive though his eyes are open. 'What would you usually have been doing on the longest day, Donald-John? What did a *gamie* do in June? Shoot things eh? Always shooting and trapping!' His body contracts as if to answer and she returns to the bed and squeezes his hand. 'Will I tell you what I'll be doing when I finish work this evening? You've to promise not to tell though, it's a secret.' She leans in close, speaks softly in his ear. 'Now, isn't that the best way to end the day? There are footsteps in the corridor, three quick raps against the door.

'Alison, that's just about time for your shift to finish.' She lets go of his hand, straightens the covers as if to leave but then leans forward and rests her hand lightly on the old man's chest. 'Come with me,' she says, softly. 'You know the place. Come with me and watch the sunset.'

*You know the place. Loch Mallachie: Loch of the curse. You used to look for eggs there as a boy, blew them out and kept them in a box beneath your bed. Later, you'd made pocket money collecting them to order for the gardener on the estate. He sold them on, to men he knew in England, and it wasn't until they took you on as an assistant to the*

*gamekeeper that you realised the bugger had fleeced you for a fortune. You found your first tree creeper nest here, tucked behind the bark of a scots pine. You'd had to climb to get the tiny pink-speckled eggs, then, too high to jump, had popped them into your mouth to keep them safe while you climbed down.*

*There's something different about the light now. Something you ought to remember.*

She arrives before dusk, when the sky is a blurred palette of greys, the loch a darkening stain. She follows the path along the edge of Loch Garten, pushing the bike where the ground is rutted, abandoning it beside a stand of juniper bushes when she reaches the smaller body of water: the prettier, quieter loch with its island of pines. Beneath her feet, tree roots stretch out towards the loch, raised veins on gnarled ground, and she teeters as she makes her way down, pulling the pale blue hoodie over her head and pushing off her shoes, shaking them from her feet so that one shoe spins away obliging her to hobble on the carpet of needles and dropped cones to collect it. She leaves them in a pile, with her clothes, then steps tentatively, fawn-like, into the loch, the water braceletting her ankles. Beneath her feet the ground is all sludge and decay and she inhales sharply, pushing herself forward until the loch catches and holds her, the jolt of cold squeezing the air from her lungs. This is what she wants: a rinsing, a shock to the skin, an affirmation that she at least is alive. The peaty water makes her tea coloured. She turns onto her back and lies completely still, closing her eyes, letting the water cleanse her.

*And then suddenly you're there, but high, as if you're back at the tree creeper nest, looking down at the loch below. Beyond, Tulloch Moor, where the blackcock lek in spring, stretches into the distance; beyond that the Cairngorm massif. And there is the girl, just as she promised, sliding through the water like an otter and heading to the far side of the loch. You'd like to call out, to thank her for the invitation, but you know that the distance between you is too great. Night's not far away, then just a blink until sunrise, the shortest of passages.*