

Holding On

(1529 words)

She started her walk at the end of the track, where it kissed farewell to the main road. Then she walked in towards Destination, following its unrolling. There was a loch to her left, named after a man who had fallen through the ice one winter a long time ago. The story was the man had been sheep-stealing and as he attempted to make off with his spoils the ice broke underneath him. Presumably he perished but no-one knew for sure. Perhaps he was carrying the sheep and the added weight proved too much. The man's Christian name and surname had, over time, merged in the act of naming the loch into something that sounded exotic and alien. It had liberated itself from its original referent.

The cyclonic conditions were favourable for the walk. She seemed to think that previously there had been more in the way of weather on these walks. More texture. But today was blander and she struggled to find the words to define it. Never mind. It wasn't too hot; it wasn't too cold. That was about as much as she could say about it. Occasionally, there came a light breeze, sufficient to refresh the walker. It breathed intermittently, almost like primitive air-conditioning. When the breeze came up she thought she could hear a low hum and snatches of what she thought sounded like

music, or, more accurately, muzak. But that was impossible, surely?

She was ascending a gradual incline now and soon arrived at the interpretative board. This commemorated the discovery of a man, another man, who had been buried for centuries in the peat. He had been discovered by accident and his clothes had all been miraculously preserved. The board explained it all. But as she read it, the woman thought it seemed altered in some ways. There were grammatical errors and wrong word choices, as if it had been transcribed in an offhand manner by someone who had misheard and therefore misunderstood what had been told to them. The font was wrong, too, surely? What she believed they called ‘comic sans’. And yet, as she read the solid fact of what was before her, she started to doubt the veracity of what she believed had been there originally. She remembered redecorating a room in her house many years ago and being shocked at how quickly she forgot how it had been before that. Had the doors really been painted that lilac colour? Had there really been a carpet underfoot in that blocky geometric pattern?

Before she reached the loch that ran alongside the road she noticed a grouse which had flown down and remained in sight, quite tame. How vividly red were its ‘eyebrows’! How pale its legs! And the plumage, she almost said ‘foliage’, although she

wasn't close enough to study it, was, she was sure, satisfyingly complicated. You could get lost in its whorls, lose yourself in its mirroring density. The loch had supernatural associations but that was in the past and only persisted in the name, and in the old language. Now it seemed to be all in order. Just the merest of ripples on the surface, enough to make it interesting and give the reassurance of movement. A mild corrugation, a soothing corduroy effect, where the wavelets reflected light and shadow pleasingly, tastefully.

After the loch she set off, as usual, down the narrow steep valley where she could see ahead and across to the fields rising to the top of the low hill opposite. The silage had been cut, creating a striped effect which she liked, especially when viewed at an angle. But she thought she noticed something different today. The pattern ahead was identical to the pattern on the left, beyond the stone wall, as if it just been repeated blockily, carelessly. It should be subtly different, given the angles and the light, surely? And the crüis higher up on the hill were too regular also, and too similar in size, as if they had been over-carefully placed to give a suggestion of random and natural distribution.

She turned left then as always, and headed inland along the voe, looking down at the holms and skerries and the ragged edge of the shoreline. She remembered how once she had compared the way

the grass gave way eventually to stone and then sea, to a jumper, a jersey, 'out at the elbow'. She could not think of a new metaphor to describe what she saw today, though. For one thing, it didn't seem to be as ragged as it should be. In fact, it was almost as if it had been cut with giant pinking shears, that was it, to give a childlike impression of unevenness.

And the further she went on in her walk the more she noticed, or thought she noticed, changes and differences from what she expected. For instance, she couldn't see the old abandoned cutchin kettle on the holm. In the past, fishermen had strung their nets there, out of the way of sheep and children, while the cutch, the preservative, dried. It was derived from bark, and the cutch solution was heated up in the 'kettle'. Usually it sat on the shoreward side, squat and black, like a cauldron. Now it was gone. Had it been tidied away? Deleted, so to speak, after all this time? Something was also amiss with the spring squill: it no longer appeared to shade from the centre towards the fringes, a delicate lilac fully abloom in the sun. Now it seemed smudged and out of focus with clipped edges.

But then after a time it started to seem as if the changes were familiar, as if they had already happened and she knew somehow in advance of the fact, as a kind of privilege. Then the moment that thought settled she was unsure again, because when she

reached the turning point she saw the tide was out, spectacularly out. And yet she could remember that it hadn't been out when she set off. The walk hadn't been long enough for the tide to veer so markedly between those two extremes. But then she had never fully understood the mechanism behind tidal change, despite all her earnest reading about it. Or perhaps she had never really, deep down, felt the need to understand it, to parcel it away. And then it occurred to her there were two kinds of person. Those who took the natural laws of the universe for granted and built on them successfully, and those who failed to make that leap of faith and remained sceptical, doubting, mystified.

And when she went down to the sea's edge, just to check, she was surprised at the opacity of the water. Nor could she see any life within the rectangle that formed itself before her. On impulse, she reached down, intending to dip her hand into it. But when she touched the rocks at the sea's edge, just to steady herself, her hand went right through into nothingness and she almost fell. Her other hand went towards the water but was brought up short. It wasn't yielding but glassy, like ice, only lukewarm. As she withdrew her other hand she could feel the edges of what she expected would be rock but what felt more like a kind of hem, as if the sides were cloth, or plastic, stitched neatly and determinedly together by a solicitous hand.

Back home, or at Destination, as she now had been advised to call it, she went through the mandatory debriefing session. As usual, she had to wait to be connected. Loud 'classical' music came in bursts. Then, Please hold....please hold, before being interrupted suddenly by a tinny, uninflected voice. This always took her by surprise.

Hello, Gabriella here. How was your walk.

Fine thank you. Fine. Only...

There was a problem.

Well, some things seemed different this time...

Let me see. Which fulfilment is it.

It's Rural 49.

Yes there are issues with Rural 49.

Issues?

It is not possible for all tweaks to have been uploaded. Issues of connectivity. Plus maintenance is expensive now. Plus needing to upgrade.

Upgrade?

You are still using headset?

Well, yes...

We are moving to implant. I can book an appointment with a Surgeoneer for you.

Well, is that the only option?

If you want to continue with Rural 49. Headset no longer fully supports the full R49. But you can still have discounted alternative experiences using headset.

Oh, like what?

Let me see. There is Mountainheather, Forestfruit, Urbanvanilla, Lakeside, Canalamble, Mall, Nationalpark, Woodlandstroll, Seasidetrail, or Vistamedley, which is a kind of taster suite of the best of.... Would any of these be sufficing for you?

Oh, dear. No, I think not. If I upgrade to implant will R49 be as it was before? The same as headset?

Of course, the same but with enhancement.

Enhancement?

The same as you remember but with better tweaks.

After making the promised appointment she settled down into Fluid and made herself comfortable. Soon it would be time for Sustenance and Nightcap, and then, hopefully, tomorrow's walk, as she thought she remembered it.