

The Last Days of St Kilda

The sharp stone walls of the cleit stabbed at his back, the air peat scented, dense. His heart thumped wildly, plunging from throat to stomach, a sickening beat. John clung to the dog at his chest, the last precious thing he would ever own. She kicked against him, her breath hot and heavy in the damp air as she let out a thin whine.

‘Quiet Nell,’ he chastised her with a hiss, the same hushed, harsh tone Effie Gilles used when he swung his legs in church; a warning heavy with consequence. The dog struggled with greater urgency, making him scrape his elbows against the rough stone walls. ‘Quit it Nell, or they’ll hear ya.’ He hissed again. Bile licked the back of his tongue as he imagined footsteps approaching.

The sounds outside were muffled, barely there over the low drone of the wind, making John second guess each silence between gusts. The search would have already begun. He imagined his Da standing on the old stone wall, eyeing the *cleitean* that dotted the landscape, whistling high and clear, watching the birds scatter to the air, startled. In the darkness John felt Nell’s ears twitch.

Two days, that’s all he needed. Two days and the boat would have come and gone, taking the last of them away from St Kilda, off to the mainland forever. He’d heard the adults deciding their fate at the morning parliament weeks ago. He’d heard them speaking in that same hushed, harsh tone:

They couldn’t afford the licences.

They’d just starve left here alone.

It was a mercy, really.

He'd hide here with Nell, and when the others had left, he'd look after the both of them. He'd be the man of the island then. He'd catch the gannets on the cliffs, just like his Da had taught him to. Nell would play in the water at Village Bay and they'd never have to leave. Never.

'John?' His father's voice bounced down like a dropped rock, ricocheting off each stone before landing at the boy's feet. 'Nell?' Nell knew that voice. She spun her neck around, thrusting her soft pink tongue towards John's ear in a gentle attack of kisses. Her wet affection forced his shoulder up in protection and in that moment, Nell wiggled from his embrace, erupting into playful barks of excitement. John clutched at the air, clinging to a hope bounding towards an opening door. The shadow of his father etched itself towards him, black against the sunlight stretching across the ground. Neither spoke. His father didn't chastise him, didn't even look at him. The man simply sighed and looked down at Nell sitting obediently by his heel. After a long moment he turned and walked out with Nell at his feet, leaving John to scramble in the dark; alone.

'Please, Da!' John hung, a limpet on his father's arm, as they trudged towards the bay. The older man's face had always been hard, as if he had been carved from the cliffs themselves; impenetrable.

'Stop it, lad.' His father's voice was long, distant, thrown out towards the sea. 'I told ya, it's better this way.' The words mixed in the wind; salt laced, cold.

'Better for who?' John spat back, finally chiselling a soft sigh from the old man's lips, a hesitant stop to his step. But the man's wavering contrition was quickly

sniffed back, the boy pushed away, stumbling. The man continued marching, the dog dancing in his shadow, John trailing behind.

As they walked into Village Bay, John's vision blurred, the tears too heavy to keep back. The last of the people bustled on the rocks of the shore, talking gently to each other. John could hear old Effie Gilles chanting a prayer under her breath as they passed, stopping to let out a short gasp.

'Really, Donald?' The old woman threw each word like a pebble at his father's back. 'You brought your boy?' John watched his father's shoulders lift up and down, like a great tidal wave, swallowing her accusation whole before moving on, refusing to answer. Her eyes lingered on the boy before closing slowly, returning to prayer.

A mournful howl bounced across the stones, interjected by the sharp cry of a gannet rising towards the sky. He could run right now, John thought, run and hide back in that jagged darkness. But he was forced towards the glittering sea, following the hypnotic sway of Nell's blithe tail.

Mr Mackenzie stumbled past, his eyes lost as if navigating through a thick harr. Nell rumbled a warning growl at his dog as it was led towards the jetty, the rope already tight around its neck.

His father knelt on the wet stones, probing each one until he found a sharp black rock that stood up to judgement. Turning, he ruffled Nell's ears lovingly, pulling her towards his chest with great shaking hands.

'Good girl.' The great man's voice crackled, grit filled, broken. 'You've been a good girl.' Her tail thumped a happy beat onto the stones.

'Please,' John whimpered, face soaked with tears. The air wheezed through his throat in short, sharp gasps. He heard a distressed yelping further along the shore, the weep of a woman behind.

A deep splash echoed across the bay, followed by a communal intake of breath; a silence that spread, soul to soul.

'Good girl' His father whispered into Nell's ear as he brought the rope around her neck, the rock a heavy anchor at its end. Nell let out one final, thin whine.

John wrapped his arms around his face. He wouldn't watch, refused to witness his father lifting Nell into his arms, her soft pink tongue kissing the salt off him, one last time. John could almost feel the roughness on his own face.

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John's ears rang with the gentle slosh of his father's legs in the water.

They'd just starve left here alone.

His chest fought for each breath.

It was a mercy, really.