

## Lights

The faint outline of the rooftops at the edge of the town was lit by the dim orange glow of the street lamps below. I couldn't see anything beyond the line of the roofs but I knew what was out there; bulks of hills looming silently in the deep darkness; the black waters of the loch lapping thirstily against its broken shoreline; unseen depths holding fabled inhabitants which etched their way into the minds of many who'd passed that way.

The river slid mournfully out of the loch and down the glen towards the town. It carried with it tiny traces of living creatures. Some of them spent their long lives well below the waterline; out of sight and out of mind. They'd only surface occasionally. If you were very lucky you may have found yourself in the right place at the right time with a camera to your eye and have caught a fleeting glimpse of a dark shape breaking the surface. If you'd blinked you'd have missed it. If you were unlucky you may have found yourself face to face with the unimaginable.

As it neared the town the river gathered up its strange cargo; twisted shopping trolleys that had never made it home; bicycles with rusted frames jammed motionless but wheels that still turned in the flow; golden rings that had slipped from living fingers and been cast off into the murk; silver coins that nestled amongst the rocks of the river bed having once skipped gracefully across the waters. The river passed around a series of small islands before slipping through into the harbour basin and finally out into the firth beyond.

The harbour road was cut into sections by four sets of traffic lights, all of which I could see from my window. The traffic lights beamed out their messages in silent sequences of colour. Motorists obeyed; pedestrians obeyed - who was I to do any different? There were traffic lights all over the town. They loitered near the school gates; they gathered at office blocks and at the

shopping centre; they stood eerily still at the town boundaries, silent sentinels on patrol. They never slept; they were always watching. I was watching too; watching and waiting for my signal. At exactly 8PM my alarm sounded a single beep and I recorded my observations in my journal:

G/G/G/G

Without as much as a second thought I grabbed my jacket and headed out. I slipped the latch on the shed and clipped the lead on Hamish's collar. He'd looked pleased to see me; his big brown eyes shone and his whole body wagged in time with his woolly tail as he danced along beside me, snapping at the lead and licking my hand, seemingly oblivious to the fact that I'd been his gaoler and was now leading him off blindly to an unknown fate.

"Time for a little trip Hamish?" I said. He looked up at me as if he just knew. Earlier that same day the man who lived next door had hammered on our front door. He was small, stocky and very angry. His head seemed too big for his body and he had thick black hairs sticking out of his cheeks. They looked like spiders legs to me. I wondered if he really did have spiders living under his skin and if they were talking to him in spider-speak, disturbing his brainwaves with their wicked plotting. While he spoke, the spider's legs moved up and down in time with his mouth. I realised then that they were controlling him. Some of us were controlled by invisible messages from an unseen heaven; others by the secret instructions of traffic lights. The angry man had his spiders and they were turning his face an odd purple colour. Spiders can be evil when they are in charge.

Behind him was a little boy. He had a mop of messy dark hair and a lopsided mouth which was fixed in a half smile - half grimace. I just knew that he was more frightened of the man than anything else in the world. He kept looking at me and then looking away before I got a chance to search his eyes for the truth. The eyes always hold the truth. He wore a dirty white T-

shirt which had an image of a hand-drawn flower on it with one yellow petal. I caught his stare and he turned heel and ran off to his garden. I could see him hiding behind the wall, facing the other way until the angry man with the spiders in his head was finished. I wondered about the little boy and whether the lights would signal for him one day.

The angry man was no match for Agnes. She told him that she was sorry that his dog had gone missing but that we hadn't seen it and certainly hadn't done anything to the poor beast. Eventually, he just shook his head and walked away but not before giving me a narrow-eyed stare. Agnes hadn't lied; not completely anyway. She hadn't seen the dog; I'd made sure of that. I didn't want her interfering with the important work to which I'd been assigned.

We followed the river upstream, past the sets of traffic lights at the road bridge. They saw us coming and changed immediately to red, allowing us safe passage on towards the islands. The narrow footbridge creaked and swayed gently as we strode across. The waters of the river slipped below in a low burbling drone leaving a faint mist of breath hanging on the surface. At night, the gates to the islands were locked and marked with a sign which said “NO UNAUTHORISED ENTRY”.

It was easy enough to climb around if determined, which I was. I would never have ventured into the islands at night in normal circumstances. The place was creepy enough during the day with tight groves of ancient trees blocking out the light and dead-end paths which led to one too many secluded spots on the edge of the drifting river. Those places were ideal for moments of quiet contemplation but they could also hold a solitary silence where shadows could feed on the unsuspecting.

I could just make out the path in front of us, the same one on which Mrs. MacLean had ran terrified, convinced she was being pursued by shadowy assailants that had materialised from

within the trees. We passed the place where the Johnstone boy had tumbled into the river, never to be seen again. Over time the islands had become run down and neglected, a no-go zone which the council had fenced off and covered in signs that no one ever read.

Hamish tugged at his lead, eager to explore. I kept a tight hold of him. I didn't want to lose him now, not when we were so close. Above, the sky was dipped in an impossible black, broken by a jagged net of branches. It didn't take us long to reach the bandstand grove. I knew exactly where each of the stepping stones was; I'd been down there a hundred times. I lifted Hamish and picked my way across to the Dark Island.

The rocky outcrop was completely covered in a strangle of rhododendrons. No one ventured out there any more; there was barely room to move. I knew the way through though, under the bushes and clinging to the edge of the treacherous rocks. The pool was the deepest section of water in this part of the river. If you'd attempted to paddle out you'd find your feet dropping into nothing at the very edge of the island. The council had marked the pool with a huge wooden pile onto which was nailed a sign which said "DANGER! NO SWIMMING". Good advice I'd say; swimming out there was the last thing you'd want to do.

I sat at the edge of the pool and waited. Hamish lay down and looked over the river; his ears fell flat and his legs began to shake. The waters churned lazily like a huge vat of black treacle. Hamish gave an almighty tug on the lead as he tried to make a bolt for it. I grabbed onto him with both hands and was knocked off my feet. Behind, a deep plunging sound echoed across the night as something massive broke through the surface. She must have sensed we were close. I grabbed the back of Hamish's collar as tight as I could. He struggled and snarled as the shadow moved towards us across the pool. "It's alright Hamish," I said, "best not to struggle."

"Caught you!" said the voice. I spun around, straight into the flailing fist of the angry

man. He smashed his punch hard into my face and I felt my nose crush. My mouth filled with the metallic taste of blood and I fell backwards into the pool, gulping in a head-full of icy, peaty water. I began to sink and a voice in my head said "This is it."

I drifted down through the depths, buffeted by the undertows. I hit the bottom with an unceremonious thump and my eyes snapped open just in time to see, directly above me, the ghostly outline of a huge shadow which sped across the surface like a furious storm cloud.

I struggled upright and summoned all my strength to kick for the surface. The air rushed from my lungs but the weight of my sodden boots held my ascent to an agonising age. I broke through with a gasp, my eyes full of silt and gunk only to be flung sideways by a sweeping wave. There was a deep, scrambling commotion on the edge of the island. As I looked up I saw the angry man levitating from the waist up above the surface of the pool. He lunged violently from side to side before being pulled under in a single swallow. Moments later, at the far edge of the pool I watched a massive leathery hump coil over as it headed back into the sightless depths.

I scrambled ashore and was pounced upon by a delirious Hamish. He licked at my face and pawed playfully at my drenched jacket. He must have seen everything; lucky for him that he couldn't talk. I held his head and looked deep into his eyes. He knew we'd done the right thing and so did I. Out in the pool the waters had returned to their sluggish stir. Sunken footsteps marked the last few steps of the angry man on the island's shore. They ended at a large bunker that was lined with frantic scratchings. I knew that the river would claim this evidence by morning.

We clambered back through the rhododendrons. Hamish skipped lithely over the stepping stones and we wasted no time in the darkness of the deserted island. As we left the island Hamish stopped and looked back uncertainly, like his name had been called across the night.

“It’s alright Hamish,” I said. “We are safe now. At least for tonight.”

He didn’t look all that convinced but was soon walking contentedly beside me. The traffic lights on the bridge clicked to green as we approached; a subtle acknowledgment of a job well done.

At the end of our street I tied Hamish loosely to the foot of a traffic light pillar. I knelt beside it and looked up at the light. Just for a moment it strobed through a rainbow of colours. I knew that they were pleased. I didn’t know why they’d chosen me. For all I knew there were others too. Sometimes you just had to resign yourself to a higher power. I walked back to the house, pausing only to watch Hamish struggling to free himself from his ties. Above him the lights changed methodically. I knew that they'd signal to me again.