

STONEWARE

by Donald S. Murray

It always unnerved me to visit the Camerons in our village. Whatever was done around their house was always done to the full. Their women cooked and baked to perfection; their menfolk were skilled in other, different ways. You entered each field of their croft, for instance, through a fine, elaborate gate. Legendary Highland figures like the Brahan Seer peering through a hole in his prophetic stone, or mythical creatures such as the Loch Ness monster or the Each uisge (or water horse) were carved into its wood.

Yet it was their stonework that most fascinated me. Step through a gate towards their home and great drystone dykes immediately surrounded you. Each rock was picked and placed perfectly in position, a difficult thing to do with rough, unwieldy gneiss. They seemed to do this almost regardless of a stone's shape, finding a spot where it could fit exactly.

Throughout the years I had gone to their home, I was always conscious of the miracles they could fashion with stone. Their home had been built that way – a white-washed, two-storey building complete with storm-windows that towered over the barn and outhouses that had been built in its shadow in the yard. This time, however, when I went to their door with my son Craig, I was aware that the place was even more magical than it had been before. Inside its borders there was a collection of stone bushes and trees. Lichen crusted the grey trunks of the latter. Flint leaves shimmied on long branches of gneiss. Craig ran around them, brushing them with his fingers, hearing them chime and tinkle with his touch.

‘Wow!’ he kept saying with all a four-year-old's sense of wonder. ‘Wow!’

Yet that proved to be the least of the delights on display. Instead, there was the stone cat purring on the stone path, looking for all the world like a grey tabby, carved and chiselled out of rock. On the front doorstep, a stone dog stood, its tail upright in welcome, its tongue hanging out. It looked much the same as Dileas, the collie they had owned for years in my childhood. Behind it was the man they nicknamed Clach, his arms outstretched in greeting, a broad smile on his grey dust-coloured face.

‘Good to see you ... Good to see you ...’

I winced a little as he pumped my fingers, feeling a little fragile since my wife Brenda had left me a few months before. He guided Craig and me into his kitchen, patting both our backs in welcome as we went.

‘It's nice to see you, Gordon. Even if it's just for a wee while. Too many people are leaving here these days. Far too many.’

His wife Mairead swirled up behind him. Her clothes and hands were also masked by grey, though in her case the covering had been caused more by flour than a layer of stone-dust. She seemed to carry, too, a dust storm around her, all stirred into action by her large, exuberant frame, the whirling extravagance of her hands.

‘You'll have to have something to eat,’ she said. ‘A wee strupag. Some cakes as a treat.’

I nodded my head, grinning and looking down enthusiastically at Craig. ‘That would be nice, wouldn’t it? Mairead is the best cook in the district. Her baking is something special.’

‘That’s really nice of you to say, Gordon. ...’

‘But it’s true, Mairead. People always seem to have difficulty leaving your house after eating here. It’s a sign of how good your baking is.’

Mairead and Clach looked at each other after I had spoken and I wondered if I had said anything wrong. But then, an instant later, their smiles were restored, my jacket stripped from my back. I was being ushered into an armchair in front of the stove.

‘We don’t have that many visitors these days,’ Clach grinned. ‘Not like the old days.’

‘And we’re always delighted to see anyone. Especially a young lad from the village. Someone who remembers how this place used to be. How you could go in and out of every house and no one was a stranger. Not like the village these days ...’

Mairead was prattling as she worked around the stove, dipping a teaspoon in and out of a caddy with its brightly carved display of the Northern Lights decorating its outside. Craig looked at it with sparkling eyes, his attention drawn, too, by the collection of stone mice gathering on the kitchen work-surface, right beside the bread-bin.

‘You like them?’ Clach smiled.

‘Yes...’

‘We got them in the barn. You can play with them if you like...’

I grinned, watching him lift and dance them through the air, laughing and making little squeaking noises as he did so. Again, they were as skilfully created as the dog and cat outside, each detail carved with precision and exactness. The boy’s concentration on them provided a moment for Clach to bend towards me at the fireside. His thick grey hair swept back from his forehead, he looked at me with blue eyes that were filled with concern.

‘You all right?’

‘Yeah ...’ I began, but then I stopped myself. There was no point in lying. Instead, I told them about how Brenda had walked out on me for another man and how I was worried about losing contact with Craig. I explained how, too, I had been finding my job in the bank difficult, how there was too much pressure to make sales.

‘... It’s not how people like us think,’ I continued. ‘When I joined the bank, I was naïve enough to think of working there as a service to others. Not screwing them out of every last penny they’ve got.’

‘And life in Glasgow?’

I shrugged. ‘I don’t like that very much either. Too much rush-rush, running about. It’s not the way I operate.’

Clach reached out a hand to pat and reassure me. 'I always knew you'd find it that way. I always knew you were one of us.'

Mairead's cup of tea and cakes arrived; the latter looking as sweet and legendary as I remembered. The pastry was exquisite in its delicacy, prepared to perfection. Breathing deeply, I could inhale the wondrous aroma of her cherry and almond cake, even the freshness of the scones placed before me.

'Eat and drink,' she declared, passing Craig a glassful of berry juice. 'Eat and drink.'

'Thanks...' I muttered. 'Thanks very much.'

'The only thanks I need is watching your enjoyment.' Mairead grinned, flouncing around as if she were a whirlwind, passing out gifts to all that were nearby.

That kind of gratitude was easy to display. I bit into the pastry, drank my tea, enjoying the extraordinary range of flavours mingling in my mouth. I watched Craig drinking his berry juice too. There was a smile on his face as he brought the glass away from his lips. He, too, relished its taste.

'It's great to have you back,' Clach said. 'For too long, too many houses here have been empty. People moving away. There's nothing quite as sad as watching faces disappear from all around you, lights going out. Every day someone from here goes is like a little death, a little fading of the life that used to be here. You know what that does to those who are left behind. It's as if they're being drained of their existence, their life-blood.'

'It must be hard,' I muttered, speaking through a mouth muffled with cake.

'You're too right it is. And you know the hardest thing of all? It's that so many who go away aren't happy. Their lives turn out miserable. They end up divorced or stuck in jobs they hate. That's what happens to loads of people like you who were designed for the island way of life ...'

'Well, I'm not sure ...' I began.

My thoughts were becoming slow and sluggish, as if words were fossilising and growing stiff on my tongue. I could see, too, Craig in the corner. He was still playing with his stone mouse, but now it was as if he was doing this in slow motion, taking an eternity to whirl the strange creation round with his fingers, faltering all the time.

'Well, we're sure. We're sure. You're one of the ones who belong here and should never go down to the city or leave home. That's the reason why we're keeping here among us. That's the reason we've decided we're never letting you go ...'

I looked at him in amazement, trying to open my jaws to speak. At the edge of my eye, I could see that Craig's movements had all but stopped. He seemed, too, to be losing his natural colour, transformed into a shade of grey. I gazed down at my own fingers. I could see the same thing happening to them, skin becoming sallow and lifeless. Shifting my head slowly, I turned a hardened stare in Clach's direction. He was smiling reassuringly at me, clearly convinced that he was doing right.

‘That’s why we’re turning the two of you into stone. We want to see those we care for all the time. We want to hold them forever in this place ...’