



LIGHTS ⊕ VER

SHEEL

BARRY STEAD

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Part One

Everything that Michael Durham had ever wanted was embraced by the narrow, winding streets of Sheel, and he had never known he had wanted it until life had brought him here. It was his refuge against a hostile universe and after eighteen months he was just another Englishman retreating from the twenty first century, accepted and invisible. He liked that and was grateful.

A January wind driving up the loch blasted into his face when he turned the corner by the Agatestone Gift Shop into the High Street. It was dusk and ahead of him the rows of shops were spilling their light onto the pavement. A group of women huddling together outside Stones' Bakery, nodded and smiled at him as he ran past. Inside Sheel's General Stores the talk was all about the weather and the bitter storms to come. He bought a bottle of turpentine and ran on.

Ardrossan House, his house - his home - stood alone in a ring of gnarled scots pines near the broad entrance to Glen Gannoch some eight minutes run from the town. Every time he passed under the pines he expected them to lurch at him, yet once negotiated they made him feel safe. Beyond their branches Jupiter could be seen rising over the Tennech Ridge on the southern side of the sea loch. A steeply rising fell clad in heather, dominating Sheel and the little villages dotted along its shore, it was a magnificent view at any time of the day, or any season of the year.

"Daddy's back!" squealed a voice as soon as he closed the door, and a small, blonde, curly haired bullet in new pyjamas shot down the hall to embrace his knees. Annie.

Cath, her mother, was leaning against the kitchen door, a picture of the woman his four year old would become: tall, fair, to his eyes very beautiful. Cath's face, her form, her strong personality, like fractals revealed more wonder the deeper he gazed.

"I have another commission," Cath announced, her west coast American accent giving the words a sensuality that even after six years could still arouse him. His wife... his wife. He kissed her.

"Mrs Crow came to see mummy," Annie chimed in.

"Don't call her that. It's Mrs Lauder," chided Cath trying to conceal a smile.

"But she looks like a crow."

Cath explained: "She visited just before and wants me to do a picture of the manse."

For Cath, commissions from the locals were rare. Most of her income came from sales to tourists in the Agatestone Gift Shop. Last summer - their first in Sheel - she was shifting eight to ten per week: The spare bedroom

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converted to a studio became a production line as Cath, covered in paint and hair tied up, knocked out a range of Sunset over Sheel and Dewey Morning in Glen Gannoch till their saleable tweeness nearly drove her insane. She was using the winter to stock up for the summer and had hopes that a gallery in Oban would take more pictures. This income was the only one they had for the moment. On the hall table was a covered canvas ready for delivery.

They shared a boisterous tea, Annie climbing all over them and spilling food. Then after a few games he took his daughter up to bed. "Pat me, daddy," she squealed when he picked her up, this being her code for rub my back and tell me stories.

Halfway up the stairs there was an oriel window, the only touch of style in the otherwise plain stone house so ubiquitous in Sheel, through which he could see Jupiter now high over the Tennech Ridge. It was higher in the sky than he would have expected but before he could make sure a bank of cloud sweeping south occluded it.

Annie went to sleep quickly, satisfied with a short impromptu. When he came down Cath was reading in the kitchen illuminated by the red glow of the range, her legs curled up under her. My wife, he thought, gazing at her. She crossed the room and kissed him lightly on the nose, her hands digging for his crotch: her code for take me to bed and make mad, passionate love to me.

"Later," he replied, feeling himself stir.

"Spoilsport," she purred.

Michael brewed a coffee with which to face his work. He still had four hours to do if he was to keep to his schedule.

"Right, you bastard machine. Switch yourself on," he said, clattering down the cellar steps. The sleek, black tower of a computer beeped back. "Open Gallery Revenge, Gallery Work, Gallery Beyond All Knowledge." A flurry of galleries and files splashed across a wide black screen till a page came up, dense with writing, a cursor flashing in readiness. Michael stood for a second, collecting his thoughts, then began to dictate: "So great was the secrecy surrounding Factor's existence that even. No, No - delete that last sentence." Michael sighed.

As he continued, pacing up and down, dictating his past into prose, the sounds of the night - the creaking of the house, Cath padding her way to bed, seagulls far away - were banished from his senses.

When he finished near midnight he went into the back garden to look at the stars, an old habit which had never died. Encircled by the crown of pines he could see the mighty constellations of Orion, Taurus and Gemini, triumvirates of the winter sky; and between them the infinite vastness of space. Here the deep wonderment lurked; in that emptiness he could sense the fullness of the universe, star upon star, galaxy upon galaxy until the

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numbers and distances numbed the mind. Reverently silent he went inside and locked up.

Upstairs his wife was waiting for him.

Fergus Bayne McNann sat in his chair, ninety two years old, gazing out of the window into the darkness. Aphasic, his speech and writing having been mutilated by a series of cerebral haemorrhages years ago, he sat in silence; only his hand moved as he rhythmically patted the chair arm. A weaker individual would have died earlier, and gladly, but the regimen of hard work and a visit to the kirk on a Sunday kept his skeletal body and brain alive. Wordlessly his mind travelled down the roads of his memory. He smelt his first Harvest Festival in long trousers at the kirk where the onions were as big as footballs. He saw his father's neeps in prime position underneath the lectern. He saw his pretty mother in her long skirts darting down the aisle, head bobbing to acknowledge the neighbours. He remembered his first kiss with Helen in the gloaming as they walked by the loch. He recalled the day they were wed and the loveliness of her white body on their wedding night. He remembered the how she was taken from him after giving him his son. And the years of loneliness thereafter.

"You all right there, granddad?" A booming voice entered the room. "You want the lights on? Shall I close the curtains?" His grandson Alistair, he remembered. So like himself when he was young; tall, built of the rocks and mountains of the glens: a good farmer.

The old man grunted and shook his head.

"No?"

Grunt. He didn't need light to see; everything was clear in his flickering mind.

"It's way after ten, granddad. Eh? I'll sit with you a while."

Old Fergus's eyes widened as he saw the lights over the loch again.

"I went down to the shops today. Everyone's saying the storms are coming." Alistair got no response, so: "I'm herding the cattle in this weekend in case the snow comes. And Thunderer's already in the byre."

Old Fergus remembered the summer nights fifty years ago when he used to go up to Brawn Benn to watch the sunset.

"I'll put the kettle on," said Alistair, leaving the room.

Out beyond his dark fields, out to sea, a bright star hung low. From above, a pure light, an unflickering star, streaked down to join it. It hovered, motionless, then bobbed upward.

The old man's eyes took it in. And the eyes of his memory overlaid his present sight with pictures from his youth. The lights had danced then. No one alive today had seen them; only he remembered. They had come again tonight and an old, suppressed terror surged through his fragile arteries.

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Suddenly he was snapped to the present. The light was approaching, speeding toward him from out to sea, speeding toward the Benn, coming for him...

It paused, bobbing, twinkling, then shot upward out of sight.

Old Fergus grunted as vigorously as he could and staggered out of his chair for the pen and paper on the coffee table but fell in the effort, breaking his thigh on the brass fender around the fireplace. A pain more agonising than anything he had felt in his ninety two years surged through his body. Without words his emotions knew that this was the memory he was to die with: pain beyond all agony.

With the last of his determination he reached for the paper and pen, electric hell pouring through his body from his thigh. Then with all the focussed concentration he could summon from his damaged brain he put words on paper. And he had no sooner scratched across the page when his body went rigid. Lights played before his eyes and all the scenes of his life fused into one white light as the thin blood burst from the arteries feeding his brain.

“Grandfather, grandad!” Alistair called out, entering the room, dropping the tea. But the only answer was the sigh of dying lungs as the dead body of Fergus Bayne McNann rolled on the floor thrusting out a piece of paper.

Alistair pulled the paper from the corpse’s fingers. He could barely make out the letters scrawled on it but they looked like two words:



My diary