DEER, OH DEAR

They didn't like deer in the village. Just as the new buds opening bit the last of wintry air, the deer would feast at dawn on fresh rosebud. With elevated taste, the red and roe breakfasted on David Austen specials. Before Abraham Darby could blossom like a golden apricot or Graham Thomas could open its deep circles of buttercups, those deer nipped the life, yes, in their yellow red buds. Fed up, many villagers employed wire netting to protect the new roses and their fresh green shoots.

Their tiny Scottish village poked up from a deep green valley on the highland side of the silvery Tay, a river with white rapids as well as treacle pools stared at by drooling larch, oak trees and birch, pools so deep they kept still until a brown trout rose, mouth gaping like a last breath. Thick-walled stone and whitewashed cottages with black slate roofs both churned coal for breakfast, often for every meal with the fickle spring weather —sun, rain, storm, sun, rain—all in a day. Sometimes it rained with such a steady softness, a hand out the window was the only proof the rain was really there. Other times it rained so hard that the Tay gorged on its sweet green banks.

Mrs. MacLeod, a widow at the end of the village, half woke to a scream and turned onto her back to reassure her body that it was just a dream. With her arthritic hands she tugged the pillow down further under her neck, avoiding that mole that she refused to

have seen to because they would just want to take it off. Hadn't that been the beginning of the end for Grace Taylor down the way? She had lived with that mole on her leg her whole life and then the new doctor had taken it off. Not long and Grace was dead. They just don't know when to leave things alone.

Without opening her half-blind eyes, Catriona MacLeod breathed easily with the hope of returning to sleep. It had been a hard week but no one had died. She rested one hand on Angus' old pillow but it didn't bring sleep. She listened for the morning song of the blackbird, touching the old feathers through the pillowcase. Her head could feel the hard bed beneath. What she would give to be leaning it against the grimy wall of the London Underground again.

It was down south during the war with all that screaming loss and the whistling bombs overhead that she and Angus had met. And they had grown up a mere village apart. Angus had made room for her against the Underground wall in the dark. Side by side but invisible to each other, it was his voice that she leaned on, that she missed so much now. She had listened to him describe the distant beauty of the fine trout he had caught and fried in a 'poond' of butter only the night before at home on leave in Scotland. She could picture the clean greet of the morn over Shiehallion, unsentimental in his parting. All that before she had asked him, while smelling the sweet pollen of the heather on his jacket, if he was a Perthshire man, knowing he was from the valley of her own River Tay by the dropping of his t's from the middle of his words—the 'bu'er' that he fried his trout in. He was be'er, yes, better at it than her.

And they, Angus and Catriona, had survived it. He had found her back home after the war and she had soothed his memories in the hard nights—awakened him from his terrors, loved him through their six children, remembering him now to his grandchildren. That tree that was left of him, she would point her grandchildren to, towering at least a hundred and fifty feet above the mighty Tay now, a green beacon to his family when they passed through the valley. Angus had brought it down, a young sapling from the moor, saved it from a wide felling of prosperous pines to be sold by the laird, or by his vassals to be true. That wee Sitka spruce he had planted near their old home when they lived right on the river. If she got up now she could see it through her window past Mr. Smith's gate.

Then she heard it again, the cries piercing the night. Though blurred with age, she knew it was not blackie but the calls of a creature in pain. Unable to stay in her bed, Mrs. MacLeod got up. She put on her dressing gown and her increasingly superfluous spectacles so that she might look out the front window. In the gathering light of dawn she saw a small red deer impaled on Mr. Smith's front gate.

Without taking her medicine, she put on her boots and coat and went outside to see what she could do. The white gate's piercing rods no longer cut the sky; the sharp prongs had gone straight through the deer's stomach. Its great ears stood up to her coming. The large eyes so close grew blacker with fear. Its left foreleg jerked. As she got closer, another cry tore from its soft black muzzle. It was a young stag. Why did they always travel away from the herd? Mrs. MacLeod covered her ears to block out the sound and

turned away to the light opening the moor.

The Smiths were not at home, Mr. Smith fishing in Ireland just as he was for her Jamie's memorial service. She walked to Mr. Gray's cottage tucked in the hillside and knocked. She stood there a long time until Mr. Gray was at the door pulling down his shirt, pushing back his mussed jet hair. She heard Sheila in the background, asking, "Who is it?" Mr. Gray's eyes rested mid-air, as if wanting to satisfy both women simultaneously.

"I'm so sorry to wake you but there's a deer impaled on Mr. Smith's gate." He held onto the door–jamb, his eyes not quite following her words. "I don't know what to do." The terrible cry again, cutting through the river's grumble.

"I'll come." He turned away from her, craning his neck up the dark stairs. She looked around to the hills as a courtesy. "It's all right, Sheila. Go back to sleep."

Like aged brother and sister, they gained the road that paralleled the restless river's surge down past the Church of Scotland and its lawn of daffodils, past the corner shop and post office, past the Anglican Church higher up and its old drafty manse. Below them swathes of cloud reflected the river's descent. Mr. Smith's cottage sat above it all, unmoving against the restless sky. A few pink and yellow roses dared against the stone front of the house. The rosebushes bordered around to the gate, their scent nearly distracting.

"Oh my, oh my," they said together.

"It's bleeding profusely. I don't think we can save it," she said.

The path reddened beneath the deer. “You wait here, Mrs. MacLeod, and talk to him, calm him if you can.” There was no beating around the bush with Mrs. MacLeod; she got to her points as she was economical by nature. She took her deaths as they came. She stroked the soft brown fur behind his ears, talking to him soothingly all the while. She felt his knobs. So he was a knobber, a stag calf only in his second year with no antlers yet. The sides of his feet would be hardly worn. The young stag’s eyes dimmed with pain as the sun pushed upward behind the moor. The dark dorsal stripe in his creamy tail never moved. He would never be a monarch of the glen.

From the corner of her eye she saw Mr. Gray returning from his house and stiffened. A cock pheasant bleated before crashing into the air. “Now you go on in, Mrs. MacLeod. I’ll take care of the wee stag now.” Only a nod dimmed her fair northern complexion.

As she returned to her cottage, Mrs. MacLeod wondered at Mr. Gray’s greater courage. She had seen the knife held at his side. She knew from the ensuing quiet that he must have slit the deer’s throat now to put it out of its misery. She couldn’t have done it even though she knew it was the right thing to do. She didn’t feel strong enough for it. And then there were her arthritic hands. Yet there was Mr. Gray, too sensitive to trap a mole, bravely ending the stag calf’s life. From the window Mrs. MacLeod watched him lift the lifeless body from the prongs of Mr. Smith’s mean gate. From her door she followed the shape of Mr. Gray carrying the body. He laid it on his own soft grass between two mole mounds.

“Could I make you a cup of tea, Mr. Gray?”

“Aye, I could use it.”

Her kettle was already boiling as he sat down in her kitchen. “I wonder that the poor thing tried to jump the gate when it could have walked right through the hedge several yards over. I guess it didn’t see it in the dark.”

“It seems to me the deer will always jump rather than walk through an opening. Perhaps something frightened it while eating.”

“I always thought that gate with its sharp points, an accident waiting to happen. Why Mr. Smith chose that kind I’ll never know.”

“Aye, he probably didn’t give it a thought. It’s the Mrs. who works the garden and all. He likes the fishing.”

“Yes, she keeps their house in roses ‘though he’s the florist. He’s a deft hand at the funeral and wedding arrangements.” She put a spoonful of tea leaves into the warmed pot and filled it with just boiled water. Her potted geraniums in the windowsill reddened with the steam. “Mr. Smith might hook a trout.” She pinched a geranium leaf. “But a new leaf on the plant leaves him dry.” She cut two thick slices of her fruit loaf adding great slabs of butter. Glancing at Mr. Gray, she sliced a bap as well. Mrs. MacLeod brought the tray over to the table and sat down to pour. “Why don’t you ever go fishing with him?”

Mr. Gray accepted the sugar bowl from her. “I tickled enough trout in my youth. The gardening suits me just fine now.”

She watched his scratched and soil-ingrained hand engulf the bowl. He probably hated the hook in the poor fish’s mouth just as he let moles dig his garden. Too tenderhearted

he was. She saw a smudge of blood left at the bottom of his palm, the hand that was able to kill the stag. “What will you do with the deer?” She pushed the bread plate towards him.

He took a piece of fruit loaf and smiled. “It’s more than a meal for someone.”

“Why don’t you take it up to Ross?”

Mr. Gray’s eyes narrowed at the mention of his son. He put half the slice back and slowly pushed the spoon around the bottom of his mug, scraping undissolved granules of sugar. He held the spoon in the steam before replacing it on Mrs. MacLeod’s tray. “What would he be wanting with meat? He’s got all the deer up there he could want.”

“How could you know that? Besides, I heard the new laird wasn’t one for shooting.”

“He won’t have much of an estate if he lets the animals overrun it. What else did you hear at the village shop?” Rooks called on patrol above the constant traffic sound of the river’s rush.

“I heard that your Ross’s Morag is expecting.” Mrs. MacLeod set down her half eaten bap.

Mr. Gray’s eyes sunk deeper. “And I have to hear that from my own neighbor,” he said, audible under his breath.

Unapologetic, Mrs. MacLeod continued. “You could be hearing it yourself if you started going up there again.” Mr. Gray shot her an angry look then swallowed his ire with the last of his tea. “I’m sure they’d be grateful for fresh venison.”

Mr. Gray turned his spoon over and over as she nodded in agreement. Would he go to

Ross, his estranged son with this offering? Would he make the approach? Mr. Gray stood and pushed his kitchen chair in squarely. “Your geraniums are prizeworthy.” Against the window their scent brought near the distant hills rising behind them.

“Take a cutting to Morag.” She quickly nipped several stems and gave them to him.

He stuck them in his deep pocket. “Thanks for the tea.”

“Sheila will be wondering what’s happened to you.” He nodded.

Mr. Gray left. After Mrs. MacLeod washed their tea mugs, she watched three red squirrels running up and down the telephone pole next to the bloody gate. She changed into her gardening clothes. When she heard Mr. Gray’s truck leave the drive, she got out her bucket and cloth and went to clean the spikes. As she crossed the road, the squirrels scampered outside the circle of a vulture’s shadow. She glanced at Mrs. Smith’s roses, “Gertrude Jekyll,” she had told her. Yes, the roses were jekylls and hydes too. A wonder the thorns didn’t put the deer off. Mrs. Smith’s rosebushes were thick green. Yet the deer didn’t go for the leaves, only the buds. She almost wanted to taste a bud herself until the blood on the gate brought her to task. And there amidst that blood was a stray rose petal. She picked it up, thinking of Jamie, the one of her two sons who had to travel far, away from the herd. Mrs. MacLeod straightened her ancient back and stoically scrubbed the gate back to white peaks. The fresh young blood offered little resistance.

Mr. Gray took the winding road past the row of copper beeches, slowly up the glen. He checked the rearview mirror to see if the tall head of Mrs. MacLeod, still reddish

brown followed his movements. She had been shaken this morning but she was dour enough. It had been a bad year for her. Still, she should mind her own business. He looked forward to the hairpin bend ahead.

His son, Ross, was a sheep farmer–hard work and no money. It was their way of life, the hard work for the beauty and freedom on the moors. His son and wife believed it was as close as they could get to something. With the animals and the land they felt connected to life. The wild aloneness at the top was by turns exhilarating and devastating, just like their extremes of weather.

Mr. Smith knew all about it. He had been a shepherd but had left it when times were tough for work in the town. He drove the rich foreigners to and from the airport and up for their fishing and hunting. When Sheila had found the cottage to let in the village, he had gotten to know Angus MacLeod a bit before he had dropped dead from the heart two years ago. He had been the gameskeeper for the estate since just after the war. Back then he used to say, he would send the laird when he was in London, a brace of fresh pheasant down on the morning train for their evening meal. Yes, that was the simpler world now gone.

His own son was drawn back too. No future in it. Well, Ross would find his own way. Couldn't tell him. He had tried that once, that one mistake to tell him he was making a big mistake. Nothing left in farming he had told him. And Ross had been to university and was going to just throw that all away and take to the hills. Idiotic. Had he already forgotten the slaughter from the foot and mouth disease? Always some disaster just over

the hills. Ross had stormed out of the house without saying a word and gone and done just what he had warned him against—leasing the land and using all of his savings to buy the sheep. Sheila had found out all that, never losing touch with him herself.

He rolled down his window for the nutty smell of the gorse. It was still the lambing time this late May. Ross would be up in the fields checking the lambs, marking the twins to their mothers. Morag was in the doorway stepping into her boots, a bonnie lass with her long blue eyes yet not too bonnie to soil her able hands in the muck.

"What brings you up here? Anything wrong?"

The year of silence between them clawed his throat. Mr. Gray coughed. "No. I've got a piece of venison for you."

"Been shooting in the village have you?"

Morag's ease touched him. Her father-in-law laughed. "Not this time. Brought down by a barbed gate. Aye, the poor stag missed his mark. Anyway I thought it would be some meals for you. Oh, and Mrs. MacLeod sent you these cuttings."

"The poor lady. How is she?" He shook his head at the ground as if neither of them could say. Morag turned to the kitchen, examining the cuttings. "They seem to have survived your pocket. What a glorious scent." She placed them in an already crowded jam jar on the windowsill. "Right and thanks. Ross will look to the deer after lunch. Do you want to see him? I was just going to walk up to check my ewes."

"Yes, I'll come with you."

"Take this crook. We might need it." They passed the noisy hens and through the

muddy gate. The wind bounced off the untroubled sky against their backs as they climbed, unloosing chestnut strands across Morag's red cheeks.

"How are you doing this year with the lambs?"

"We haven't lost but a few." Father and daughter-in-law took stock as they walked--no lone lambs. The wind threw a temper but no one minded at all. A big lamb baa'd for its mother. "Did you see that head sticking out?" One ewe was running around with only the lamb's head visible under its tail. They were in trouble.

"Aye."

"I'll try to call Ross." She strode to the top of the moor waving her arms to the northeast. Her ewes below her stirred with her movements. No sign of recognition from Ross away in the distance. Mr. Gray kept track of the hapless ewe. Time pressed. A square-shouldered Morag turned back to her father-in-law. "Ross is too far up with the dogs. Can you help me?"

Mr. Gray nodded. "Let's try to corner her into the fence." They spread apart, keeping a few ewes with the troubled one, edging them toward the corner of the field. First, the ewes escaped and Morag had to run up to herd them down the field again. They did this several times. Then Morag had them narrowed from one side, Mr. Gray from the other. They came together as he aimed the crook for a leg. Caught, they turned the ewe onto her side, holding her down and unhooked her. "You hold her head." Morag obeyed as the old shepherd heaved, pulling the stuck newborn from its mother. "It's still breathing." He quickly rubbed the lamb in the mother's nose as they backed away, hoping the ewe

wouldn't reject her. As they walked away, they glanced back with confidence although the mother had not yet begun to lick her babe, to lap the gossamer of afterbirth. The tiny legs were just trying the air, not yet upright.

"I miss all this," he said.

"I never thought I'd hear you admit it." Mr. Gray wiped his hands on the grass while Morag opened the gate.

"I hear congratulations are in order."

With a cozy swing, Morag closed her fleece tighter across her stomach. "We'll see. It's still early days. Come look at my garden. I've just planted some new roses."

"You'll be expecting to do well with the lambs this year, then?" Mr. Gray knew how much roses cost.

"I've taken a job at the bank. We'll need it for the baby. I start after the lambing."

Mr. Gray shook his head. It wasn't like in his time when the wife stayed at home. They were all going out to work now it seemed. A dog barked and there was Ross at the garden gate with a lamb in his arms. Morag started and then smiled. "I'll get some milk for it." The two Grays stood their ground until Morag went to her husband, lifting the lamb from him. Then Ross's arms lowered like a drawbridge. His father walked towards him.

"I've come to give you a hand." There was a lull in the wind, a fresh silence.

When it picked up again, Ross held the gate open. "Aye, I could use one."

Mrs. MacLeod checked her plants in the shed. Some were wrapped still in gauze to keep away the winter chill. It hadn't worked for Jamie. Her strong husky son had been reduced to a fragile whiff. And then out. Even though he left, fierce and uncomplaining of the pain, a gentleman through and through, she writhed and cursed for him. It was monstrous like those spikes, that cancer that gouged him to the core.

She had to keep herself busy so as not to dwell upon him, the unnaturalness of his going before her. Mrs. MacLeod picked up some wire netting in the corner of the shed. She bent and unbent the wire, working it around his memory. Down the river, the prolific white of the blackthornes made her tired. Then she heard blackie sing. Hope like death jumps on you of a sudden.

She put her hands in her pockets. She pulled out the rose petal. In the other was a letter, Jamie's last to her, the one that had told her about his cancer, the one that had moved her to travel half way around the world to see him, to get there only ten days before he died, she who had traveled only as far as London. She placed the rose petal with the letter. When she got back in the kitchen she sat down and read it again. It was so cheerful for a dying letter. At the end was a line, "And hope is less dear than the dew of the morn." She stood up. With the end of her apron she wiped the dew from her window, unwinding its lonely string.