

Slipping away

Di Sylvester

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Alone, on Lewis

Clarissa closed the door behind her and heard the latch snap home.

They had been to Lewis many times before, but never for long—staying maybe a week in a self-catering cottage, and finally feeling at home a day or two before packing up and heading back to the mainland.

But this would be different. Very different. She was alone. Had been for four months now. But his flesh was with her yet, more or less—in her suitcase, sealed in a recycled cardboard urn. She would take it tomorrow, break the seal and hurl it all—the whole gritty mess—into the ocean. That was all he had asked of her.

They had passed through Grundal Borge just once that she could remember. On their way back down to Callanish, after a big-day-out to the Butt of Lewis. She smiled, remembering he had chosen the Butt of Lewis simply for its name. That was the day she had taken those wonderful slow shots of the ice-white crash of waves onto the pocket of sand, book-ended between walls of Lewisian Gneiss, that they call 'Port Stoth' (the locals say 'stow'). The cove fell somewhat short of its name, having seen its last boat in the 1960s. But she had delighted in its uselessness—looking out over The Minch with the incoming waves in the foreground dwarfing the sun-lit snow-capped mountains ranged on the mainland beyond. Oh, how she loved the Western Isles—the chill air streamed off the ocean and filled the sky. It filled her lungs and emboldened her heart. The Isles were her magic place where she forgot she stood on earth. They called to her, took her in their arms, and lifted her. Well, they had. And maybe they would again.

When he had asked her to hurl what was left of him into the ocean, she had immediately thought of Lewis. Even now she could see him, sitting just shy of the cliff edge—it must have been further north, or maybe

south. It was one of her favourite photographs. They had been resting mid-ramble. Him, on the edge of the world, looking out to sea. She had run back behind him, ten metres or so, to take a wide shot. Blue sky above, blue ocean beyond, and him—well, his back—in the middle, perched on the sheep-mown grass.

She was not sure that twelve months alone in a cottage was the answer. There was probably very little wisdom in it. It was Ogden Nash that had inspired her. Isabel, really—facing that bear, before, quietly, eating it up. She had found the image compelling. She would devour her dread of solitude—jump right in and gobble it up. For twelve months she would live here alone. In this cottage on the edge of the world. Yes, she would call home once a month. She had promised them that. But the rest was up to her. She had her books. And she had her camera. She had her laptop. She would cry. She would read, and write. She would make photographs. And walk.

Maybe she would walk too close to the edge. Maybe she wouldn't.

She woke to rain gusting against the windowpane. She