

Scottische (To the tune of *A Trip to Sligo*)

Kirsten has taken Nell into the high, bright sitting room. The steading door and hayloft entry have been replaced with floor-to-ceiling glass. The furniture is arranged about the Chinese rug, each chair turned a little at the shoulder as if distracted by the view through the new window - Tillybeg's old kailyard and then, across the renovated dyke, the rising ground beyond the Don.

Aunt Nell is given pride of place, the centre of an empty semi circle. Over a century old and sharp as all get out, her zimmer-frame is set to one side and her baroque knuckles clamp a gnurled stick, obsolete now, a mace of office. Sharp as all get out? Not quite, she thinks. Her mind is worn thin today with watching the war through the night, the flicker and the chatter on the television, endless reruns of that bomb penetrating the store room window, confirming we had reached a new level of awareness and could see the thing, now clearly and at last, from the perspective of the weapons.

Kirsten drags back the rug from the salvaged pitch-pine floor and clumps it by the skirting, clearing a space for Alexis and her boy.

"Now, Kyle. Put your hand on Alex's waist. It's OK. I won't bite you and I am sure she won't. Now. Point back – point back – side step side step. That's it! Now the other way. Point-back. Point-back."

Alexis is leading the loon. The boy's arms are stiff as though, realising where all this might end, he would stave the lassie off.

"Side step - right. Side step - left. And a hop skip round the floor."

Nell watches – wonders.

Kirsten will be kind. For a while.

Nell's cottage has been retained, set back among the trees, a red corrugated-iron roof, cold water and a Belfast sink. Wonderfully independent for her age. And comfortably affluent given what Kirsten and her man paid for the derelict steading - its location really, though the conversion itself was very satisfactory in the end.

"OK. With music," Kirsten says. "You OK, Aunt Nell?"

Nell's grip tightens at the neck of her stick.

“It’s a polka really,” Kirsten says. “It originated in Bohemia then moved into the Rhineland sometime in the early 18th Century. It was very popular in Germany.”

Nell had always thought that the Scottische was French - something salvaged from the wreck of the Highlands and polished up in Jacobite exile. The dance was in the Lonach Hall.

“Music,” Kirsten says.

Alexis is a clumsy girl, pretty but flat-footed.

It was here in the steading, where this room will be. John.

The dance was in the Lonach. Was this the tune? Not likely but it does the business – any tune that fits the steps – point back, point back, sidestep sidestep. She had heard the rumour about the gralloching.

John was sitting at the side. He wasn’t in his uniform. Most boys would be but John was in his Sunday best, high collar, pressed flannels, moustache clipped. Nell saw he wasn’t dancing. Twenty one and a sergeant in the Gordons - that’s to say he had survived that long.

Nell was in her uniform - the required black of women in those years when every farm was missing something, for now or forever, gap tooth pews in the kirk, thin lines, fallow fields. Both her brothers and Tom McGregor gone.

John took the shot - just perfect, was the word. Two hundred yards and the beast dropped straight down. John showed not a flicker. Not a tremor. And they had crossed the moor quick, clever, expeditious, keen to get the thing off the hill before the keepers caught on.

They crossed the moor, quick, clever, expeditious.

That night an eightsome reel, eddy and backflow, and John on the other side of it, on the bench beside the door to the kitchen, nursing his dram and staring at the pitch-pine floor. Nell rose and picked her way along the edge of that brooch of dancers.

It wasn’t till they had come up to the beast (a 14-pointer was the craic) till Alexander Findlay took his knife and disembowelled the creature that the trouble started. John fell into a faint and, when he came-to, started scrabbling across the moor, running and falling, throwing himself into the bog and pressing his face and body deep into the shough. The lads had to wrestle him to his feet and bear him twisting and ranting off the hill, leaving the stag, gutted, gone to waste on the heather bank.

“John? You’re not dancing?”

This. Feet set together. Hands folded in her lap. Nell. The boy looked up at.

“Miss Burnie. No. The leg’s still a bit stiff, ken.”

“Looked more like self-pity if you ask me,” Nell Burnie said.

The boy prickled and anger flared in his brown eyes and Nell remembered these boys kill, day in, day out, week by month by year. The Highland Regiments took no prisoners, they said, pragmatic men content with butchery. Iain, her youngest brother, died of wounds at Loos. Kenny was never seen again after the first half hour of the Somme. Beasts emptied. Antlers stacked. The land needing turning still, ploughed not torn.

She sat beside him.

“Nell? Aunt Nell? D’you think they’ve got the hang of it?”

Kirsten was leaning in too close and Nell could smell her, Estee Lauder eau de toilette, toothpaste, garlic. “Smelly old woman,” Nell thought and beyond the woman Kyle, Alexis’ trap, sliding right, sliding left.

“I hear your going back,” she said.

John shook his head. “Not in this life, Miss Burnie.”

“Don’t be daft, Johnny.”

“You look at things. You see things,” John said. “See that it’s all one, ken?”

“You’re just feart,” she said. “It’ll pass.”

His fury was white-hot now and this was not what she meant to happen.

“I was wondering if you’d dance with me,” she said.

“With you?”

“Aye. Leg cannae be that stiff you can’t dance with an old dame like me,” she said.

The boy squinted at her. He was breathing, heavily, through his rage, remembering where he was, at the Lonach beside Iain and Kenny Burnie’s big sister, Nell. Nell was being kind. These people just dinna ken, hanna lain three nights and two days in a listening post ten yards frae thon German trenchline and the lads couped there on the wire, in the shough, their fingers clawing through the chalk-flecked pleiter, thon mad spilled plumbing of a comrade’s guts. They hanna spent the dark listening tae the chink of weapons and the murmur of foreign gutturals, snoring, and

the gurgle, hiss and fart of slow decomposition. Breath and you smell it still. She had placed her hand on his thigh.

John checked the crowd. It was the grand chain now, the reel running towards its end. Nell Burnie's hand was gone again. Perhaps it was an error, impulse. Maybe she was soothing where she thought it hurt, passing on some healing whimsy of her own.

"It's what you have to do," she said.

"Dance?"

"Yes. Dance. And go back, Johnny. It's what the country needs."

"Is that what we are?" he said. "Shite for the fields."

But he danced the Scottishe for her. His leg was still stiff. She caught him wincing as she glanced into his face and his arms were locked as though staving off her offer and the censure, both. *Side-step side-step*. She caught him napping on the turn and stepped close, inside his guard, up-close where she could hear him breathe, feel the warmth of him through his shirt, his flannels. Close-in so he couldn't shake her off. They hop-skipped around the floor.

"I think you were having me on about the leg, Johnny," she said.

"D'you think?" he said.

"And what will you come back to?" Best to be direct, she thought.

"Come back? I said I wasn't going didn't I."

"Yes. You did. But when you come back..."

"Who knows?"

"You know the boys have gone," she said.

"I heard," he said. "I'm sorry."

Point-back, point-back.

"I was wondering," she said.

"Were you?"

"Yes."

"But I'm not going back so that's no use to you," he said.

Nell let him service her. It sealed the bargain. Kept the farm.

The music stopped.

"Come back," she said.

"I told you."

“No daftie. Tonight. My mother’ll be asleep. Come back tonight.”

The rage was still in him then, in this byre, horse-irons and shovels, the scythe upon its nail, straw warm, rat rustling, white hot fury thrusting so she lost something of her composure at the moment she conceived the bairn, the child that sealed the bargain.

The music stopped.

“There,” Kirsten said. “Now you’ll know at least one dance for the cielidh.”

Outside the floor-to-ceiling window, Kirsten’s man was parking the red BMW on the gravel apron. It seemed fair enough to Nell, them wanting to landscape the place, plough under the in-by field and scoop away a terrace in front of the steading. It was their land and their money and anyway, there was no one grandchild more deserving of the land than any other. In fact, none of them deserved the land at all. Nell felt tired. She decided she would like to go back to the cottage. She explained, carefully, to the woman that no, she didn’t want to go to the toilet. She wanted to go home.

As she leaned her weight into the zimmer-frame, she looked again to where he stood, trembling, in just that corner by the flat screen television, buttoning up his trousers, knowing he had been bought and paid for like any bull at mart. She felt his seed seep out of her, surprised how hot it felt, how quickly it chilled, congealed, dried up.

“Come back,” she said.

He went and he never did.

Back in her cottage, settled in the high-back chair in the parlour, Nell asked the woman to put her television on.

“You’ll not be wanting to watch this,” Kirsten said, as the armchair generals discussed the Desert Storm.

“Leave it be,” Nell said. She said she liked to watch the pictures.