

Christopher McPherson

The Warden

The worst thing wasn't finding him, hanging by his belt from the rusty hook where the crofters used to hang their hams to cure. The worst thing was the first thought, after the shock, the blue glazing fire that burnt the tongue of thought: After this, no one will blame me if I crack that bottle.

It was him, the Canadian kid, the polite one, the one who shook my hand and asked me my name when I took his hostel card and his money. I can't remember the last one of them who bothered to ask me my name. I'm just "The Warden" to them. But then, they don't go and hang themselves in the drying room.

I didn't open the bottle, not then. But I did take it out of the cupboard and set it on the table and sit down in front of it. The bottle I bought one day when I just couldn't make it by the off-licence one more time and see the amber glow in the window there like the answer to something. But when I got home with it she looked at me with that infinitely sad but resigned look of hers, that I-knew-you-would-but-I-hoped-you-wouldn't-but-I-knew-you-would-only-I-really-did-hope-maybe-this-time-you-wouldn't look, that made me want to pitch the damn bottle in the river. Like that was the answer to anything. Instead I set it in the cupboard and told her it was my talisman, my proof to myself that I didn't need the bloody stuff any more. Because if I could resist it there on my own shelf then I would know I was really free.

A bloody lie, of course. I could live fifty years and never crack that bottle and it would still be grinning at me, that lovely death's head grin, telling me I'm fooling myself. There is no victory. My triumph is empty. Because when I walk into the drying room to check if the sheet sleeping

bags are dry, and find a gentle young Canadian hanging from the rafter with his eyes bugged out and his face gone the color of mouldy cheese and all his beauty gone, my first thought, after the shock subsides and my guts stop strangling my breath and I can think at all, my first clear coherent thought is of that bottle.

And were I to drink it, or give it away, or pour it down the WC, the thought would still be there, virgin and amber and glowing on some shelf, like an answer to everything.

I didn't open it. Not then. The thought was bad enough. But I knew I was lost, just like that young Canadian. I sat and looked at the morning sunlight, lost in the depths of that good single malt. I wondered about him, that young Canadian. Oh, yes I'd cut him down, loosened the belt around his neck, but he was oh so cold and there was nothing more I could do. I'd called the constable, down in the village, but he was out on a break-in call, not expected back for an hour or so.

I left that bottle unopened and went to my desk, got out his card, looked at the photo, so young, so serious. I opened the card and looked through his stamps. He'd been on the road a long time; he had stamps from a dozen countries in Europe, from Spain to Hungary. Some wardens stamp the cards when they come in, but I do it in the morning, when the person checks out, so I hadn't added my own stamp. I got out my inkpad and did it now. There was nothing else I could do for him.

Was there a message in that firm handshake, that asking me my name? Maybe if I had just opened myself up a little, given just a little more than my name and change for a fiver. Maybe if I had asked him where he'd been, where he was going, Christ, asked him into my kitchen and poured some of that good Scotch down him, let him share the loneliness of his road . . .

I don't know. I am a traveller, myself, though my road is different now. I've hiked and hitched and cycled in my time, bedded in strange hostels (and when did I ask the warden's name?) or alone with a bottle of cheap wine under a hedgerow. My road is different now. I camp here under brooding skies with a woman who binds me with a tyranny of kindness and love and I let the world flow over me, pass through me. My road leads through the souls of my fellow human beings.

I take their card and their money, cook them breakfast if they wish. I send them off with my stamp and a smile, and few of them ask me my name, and few return. They come from everywhere, Americans,

Australians, Japanese, Finns, once a couple from Mongolia. They stay a night or three; they move on.

I grow my garden, milk my cow. My wife has her sheep and her rabbits. We travel through the lives of the people who use our many beds, but we don't touch them. We are on a fast express; we dare not lean out too far and try to touch, lest a part of us be carried away. By what? By whatever it is that carries them, the wanderers?

Only one has come to stay. And we sent his ashes and his hostel card back to his mother in Canada . . .

Set me up another . . .