

PAUL BROWNSEY

An Episode of Rural Depopulation

THE TROUBLE BEGAN WHERE Glen Buchan meets the outside world, where the hilly arms that embrace it descend and curve round and almost touch. That was a long way from Jack and me, for our house stands at the head of the glen. It is a castle, actually, a sixteenth-century tower house that we have lovingly restored. I like to think that cementing the stones has cemented us, too.

The castle has no entry at ground level. The door is high in the unbarled wall and was originally reached only by a ladder that was pulled up. This was for defensive purposes. It made me anxious when the authorities made us build a staircase up to the door. Someone might get in.

I shall not describe Jack. He plays no part in this story. He is simply the person you love, if any. Anyway, I know no more about him than you do, setting aside irrelevant things like what he looks like naked and habits of the leaving-the-toothpaste-cap-off kind.

Our tower, from which we often fly a flag bearing our entwined initials, stands on the crown of a hill. To north and south of us the hill throws out eastward-running ridges enclosing a strath of unknown farmlands, and each ridge is graced by three special homes which, together with our tower, are known as the Higher Houses. I liked to think that this was because they were inhabited by brave and loving couples. It was nice to know they were there, the other couples. Their inevitable happiness sustained Jack and me. By some trick of the Aberdeenshire light we could see clearly each of the other Higher Houses and its distant couple, even the ones far away towards the glen mouth. Boldly, Jack and I would wave to them from our tower, and when they waved back from balcony or terrace or dormer window we would feel blessed, as though immortals were conferring immortality.

Down below, the pattern of the fields, with little farmhouses placed among them like promises, had a beauty that I liked to think was nature's

sympathetic reflection of the love that made couples of all us couples. This beauty could sometimes make you feel there was nothing to dread.

As I said, the trouble entered at the glen mouth. In the old stone Gate House to the estate lived what looked the ideal young couple (IYC) you see in photographs in an estate agent's window. He was still boyish, but his chin and buttocks assured you he was ready for a man's responsibility. She was golden-haired and eager, absolutely free from any idea of there being a role for a woman to fill. Through windows you would glimpse them sanding floors, plastering. They would be seen to pause in their labours and open champagne, sitting cross-legged amid the loving disorder, toasting each other and the brightness of an IYC's future, exchanging kisses, eyes shining, charmingly barefoot.

Across the glen mouth Buchan House, once the laird's house, was grand enough to have been run for a time as a "country house hotel." White-haired Amabel Fyfe, our nearest Higher House neighbour, had worked there. "You would not believe the adultery," she would cry, but I would.

"Writing down different surnames with their wedding rings still on!" she would say in a rising shout.

"They could be widows and widowers," I would say, a spell to ward off evil, or, "Today lots of wives keep their own names."

Still, I was glad when the hotel failed. Buchan House became the home of the Loadsas, as we called them after they left. He had made money in transport during the oil boom, and his burly body still looked cramped from the cab of a lorry. His face was mean looking, but actually he wasn't mean, for he carried banknotes in fat rolls and gave them away freely. A farmchild, shyly asking to be backed in a sponsored silence to raise money for computers at the school to which she was bussed daily, couldn't believe his putting down for £250 an hour. When we feared that the nearest shop and post office, which was in a village seven miles away, was going to shut, he bought it and kept it going—at a huge loss, so Amabel reported. And when the IYC needed stone to add a proper bathroom onto the Gate House, he got it for them cheap.

Thin Mrs. Loadsa always seemed dressed for the directors' table at the company dinner dance. Her elaborate hairstyles and extremely high-heeled shoes did not last long in the winds and rain and mud of the glen. When standing next to her husband she tended to look away.

Mr. Loadsa took to going across to the Gate House about the stone, and then one day he and the female half of the IYC were seen kissing behind the pile of it. Afterwards you noticed when you peeped in that the renovations were no further advanced and no one lived there. Amabel reported that the male half was living with his parents in Ellon.

"No idea of their duty, these young ones," Amabel cried. "It's happiness they're after."

"Happiness!" My doctor had pronounced the C-word.

I stammered, "It's all right, they couldn't *really* have loved each other, for they weren't married." The lump's probably just a, you know, swollen gland

Soon Buchan House fell empty, too. "Divorced him!" Amabel cried in a voice that, had God been sitting on the clouds above Glen Buchan, would have left Him in no doubt just how wicked divorces are. I made the best I could of the divorce. Some people said the thing with the female half of the IYC was the last straw after a long stream of infidelities (a girl in every truck stop), but I liked to think it was his only lapse and Mrs. Loadsa divorced Mr. because she was a dedicated soldier in the same cause as Jack and I, or at least I, waging total war against the enemy, even at the cost of her own happiness. Her persistence with her high heels and elaborate hairstyles in the face of the glen weather had been of a piece with this.

I took comfort, too, in Darby and Joan, i.e., Roddy and Amabel. With her headscarf and long skirts and crisp white apron and clog-like shoes, Amabel looked like a dancing old peasant woman in a Breughel painting, though of course without the air of being ready for debauchery. Despite belonging to the aristocracy of the heart Amabel actually was a peasant, she and Roddy having risen from the farmlands below. They'd spent all their savings on having a large prefabricated bungalow built on the southern ridge, getting it past the planning authorities as repair of an old shieling. They were just down the shoulder from me and Jack, and their proximity made me feel safe, as if we lived next door to a police-station. Roddy, white-haired like her, had a flat weather-reddened face still redder from bashfulness. When he spoke, which was not often, you expected the mystic deliverances of Highland second sight but what you heard, in a hurried yelp, was that he had had a nice egg for breakfast, something like that. Their fifty years of married life were a healthy counterweight to the Loadsa divorce.

True, without Mr. Loadsa's money the shop and post office shut down, and the nearest was now thirteen miles away, but that was the necessary price, like slaughtering badgers to prevent bovine TB.

Not that it eliminated the contagion. The next to succumb were the two Roberts, Rob and Bob. This gay couple inhabited the Old Kirk, which had been converted into an open-plan home with areas for sitting and cooking and dining and sleeping. Through a lancet window you looked straight onto their very large bed. Each had curly black hair and the soft confiding face of a creature made to be kept as a pet. You would see them dawdling

together on the hillsides, shirtless in fine weather, giving each other shy smiles but speaking rarely, as if speech were needless for happiness. Both worked in an advertising agency in Aberdeen and somehow did not look quite right in their suits as you saw them driving off in the morning side by side in their BMW.

There came the day when Rob banged on our door and as I let him into the kitchen, snug despite the raw stone walls, his lips pulled themselves back into an uncontrollable grimace. I stared at his teeth, so abandoned and vulnerable. Through sobs he wailed, "Bob is screwing around."

Even more alarmingly, Bob had done it right under Rob's nose, trips out of the office "to see a client" being in fact visits to the Marine Club Sauna, Aberdeen.

Jack was out somewhere.

"I won't put up with it. He says it's just sex, but sex is never just sex. Bob and I are finished."

"Quite right," I said.

"I'll burn the fucking place down."

I said, "You do that."

I said, "How did you find out?"

"I met him in there." He burst into new tears that invited a consoling arm around his shoulders.

There was a sudden rapping on the door. I prayed it was Bob, Bob pursuing, Bob repentant, Bob with miraculous power to expunge what had happened from history and reinstate their exemplary, idyllic life together.

But it was Amabel breathless, Amabel vigorous. "He's fallen," she yelled, and we all, Rob and I and old Amabel, sprinted down the shoulder of the hill to where Roddy had fallen from a ladder while cleaning gutters. Our good-hearted unanimity of concern for Roddy was such a restorative after Rob's depressing news.

And so was Amabel's behaviour afterwards. Roddy had to go permanently into a care home at Banff where medical attention was always at hand. But three times a week Amabel walked the six-mile length of the glen to get the thrice-weekly bus past the glen mouth that would take her to visit him, and then in the evening walked the six miles back up the glen. "Wife's duty," she barked. More than ever, Amabel and Roddy became our beacon. In her dear familiar eyes I liked to detect the devotion and greatness of heart that come when you're old.

And besides her visiting regime, arduous enough for a woman in her seventies, Amabel kept up her housekeeping job at the Shooting Lodge, for she needed the money.

The Shooting Lodge was surplus to requirements now that the wealthy foreign shooters were transported in from city hotels by fast cars. Of the couple who bought it, you saw Hugh at windows, staring out, bulky and untidy but always with a bow-tie, which allowed you to think he was basically cheerful about things. He was said to be preoccupied with the Picts. It was Marianne, as plump and placid as a successful marriage, her hair in burnished braids around her head, who impressed herself upon you. All alone in her quilted jacket, she walked the footpaths she knew so well as though exploring them. Her serene smile was a descent of grace, an authoritative assurance that you and the life you lived were admirable. During her long periods away, Amabel strode back and forth along the ridge to housekeep for poor Hugh.

No-one gave any thought to Marianne's absences until during one of them Hugh descended off the balcony of the Shooting Lodge and smashed his head and died.

"Not an accident," said Amabel.

"Oh, but you said he drank, all the empties you had to take out, that was the inquest verdict, Accident, we mustn't doubt the public authorities."

"He gave her warning," she cried from the ridge above the innocent beauty of fields and farms, "that he would throw himself to his death the very next time she went away to—"

"An elderly relation, I've always thought."

"—her lover!" With pride and scorn Amabel bawled the completion of her sentence to the winds. "That is what she called it."

After the long drive from the crematorium the remaining inhabitants of the Higher Houses gathered at the Shooting Lodge. Funerals should bring consolation and, yes, I could feel Hugh had done me a service, for (a) he could be seen as a hero of passive resistance, a Buddhist monk burning himself to death while the occupying forces strut in triumphal procession, yet (b) his throwing himself from his balcony somehow pre-empted my throwing myself from our tower, should Jack ever leave me. By now we all knew that Marianne, quietly moving among us with sherry, had told Hugh on their marriage that she would spend half the year with a man who ran salmon farms near Oban. From the blinked-away tears and her quiet broken references to her irreparable loss, you would have thought you were looking on grief incarnate—a valuable lesson in how the Devil disguises himself. I said pointedly, "Has anyone else noticed through the lancet window that the Old Kirk floor has rotted and collapsed since the place was abandoned? Divine judgement on *open-plan living*."

Professor Lickleyhead murmured, "It's sound evolutionary strategy for a woman to have two mates. More variation in the offspring, more support for the offspring, therefore more chance of the offspring surviving and therefore of her genes surviving."

So nature, too, was engaged in the conspiracy to undermine the most precious thing in the world or out of it. I looked through the French windows at the heather just coming into bloom, and knew that this year it would not strike me, as it usually strikes people, as more purple than ever before.

"But she hasn't got any children," was the best protest I could manage, too loudly because Marianne turned and gave me one of her enhancing smiles.

Professor Lickleyhead, who had dashing sideburns, lived in the Old Manse. His wife, a pretty little woman, had been his secretary and still was, in a way. He was bony and tall, and his trousers were never long enough. You would see him putting rubbish into the bin furtively, as though this were not to be counted as part of the life of Professor Lickleyhead.

He and I had strolled out through the French windows to a little stone seat in a shelter that had a canopy of antlers. He sat down and patted the seat for me to join him, and when I did, the hand that had patted the seat squeezed my crotch.

I said, "Is this sound evolutionary strategy, too?"

His eyes surveyed next year's research budget or the audience at a learned conference. "There is a good deal of support for the kin-selection hypothesis, according to which that part of the population with a disposition towards sexual acts with those of the same gender tends to contribute resources to the offspring of its siblings, with whom, of course, it shares genes, therefore facilitating the survival of its own genes." My question must have reached him as consent, for as he spoke he squeezed and stroked more systematically.

"But this is infidelity. It's not right."

"*Infidelity? Right?*" I was Jane Goodall, perversely attributing feelings to chimpanzees (not, alas, monogamous) instead of confining her scientific reports to their overt behaviour.

"It's only gay," he snapped, his face wearing its taking-out-the-rubbish look, as I ran indoors for refuge with Jack. Over the glen moor dark clouds rolled in like a long-fated invasion, and great gusts splattered raindrops. Jack and I began the drive back to our tower through a howling maelstrom that made the whole glen a place of horror and desolation.

But nature had its poetic revenge on one who had conscripted it to undermine love. I learned the next day that the storm blew down an ancient Scots pine onto the Old Manse, causing masonry to kill Professor Lickeyhead as he lay in his bed. When Amabel told me that his wife, whom we saw no more (for she had no one in the glen to be secretary to), survived because they slept in separate rooms, I was warmed by an even stronger sense of an upholding plan.

And so were left, in the Higher Houses, just Jack and I plus Amabel, who still visited her Roddy thrice-weekly and sometimes had him delivered home by ambulance for weekends. In some ways these were not bad years. (1) Jack and I were no longer surrounded by couples whose richness of connection made us feel as though a secret was being withheld from us. (2) Hugh's death (I'd been sure before that it had done me a service!) activated a secret self-healing mechanism that disinfected Glen Buchan by causing Marianne to move to Florida. She fled her husband's ashes, which, from below, we had watched her scatter into the rhododendrons from his fatal balcony, a queen dispensing favours; she also abandoned the salmon farmer, whom I liked to think of as suffering all the horrible pangs I'd suffer if Jack left me, for he had been complicit in adultery. (3) Amabel's continuing devotion to Roddy was a continuing inspiration. (4) There was cheering news in the *Press and Journal* that the Marine Club had burned down. The report of Rob's trial stated that he smuggled in paraffin, just another person carrying a plastic mineral water bottle. The bodies of six naked men were found in the ruins. All these signs encouraged confidence that our love would survive.

Then on one of his weekend visits home Roddy crawled the mile along the ridge to our castle and yelped up our stone staircase that Amabel was dead.

She wasn't, but she'd had a stroke. Roddy was whisked back to his care home and a social worker, who was young and sweet-faced and called people by their Christian names, came to arrange for Amabel to follow. Amabel's speech, because of the stroke, was incomprehensible to her, so I interpreted.

"Gurgh uum ae yooyeem gurgh shyash toep netterth cearghy."

"So long as I can be with him, that's all that matters to me."

If I reported that as what she'd intended to bark, who would be the wiser?

Amabel, yes, but she had no mouthpiece but me.

Her eyes were just orbs with colour and mobility.

The social worker's voice tinkled, "Did you catch what Amabel said, Terrance?"

I stared at the lurid orange and yellow swirls of Amabel's carpet and heard myself say, "What *Mrs. Fyfe* said, *Ms. Puttock*, is, 'I've done my duty to him. Send me to Perth, I've my sister lives there.'"

Why, oh why, did I say it? In a rush of self-justification I allowed mad maxims like *Honesty is the best policy* and *The truth shall make you free* to rattle in my mind, but actually I was an ecological criminal. I'd made a vast hole in the ozone layer that protects Glen Buchan.

Amabel nodded with her old vigour and was put down for a care home near Perth, one hundred miles from her Roddy. I comforted my guilty conscience by reflecting that she might have been able to contradict me by writing down her evil wish.

As I saw the sweet-faced social worker out her sing-song voice delivered the final blow: "It's a valid choice, Terrance, that female clients do often choose as regards the care accommodation options as regards themselves and their husbands."

So the evidence is against us, Jack and me. From our castle at the head of the glen we look out upon the ruins of the other Higher Houses, and I struggle to realise that Jack is actually holding my hand. I recall the couples we once waved to, and I shiver at the huge disfiguring stripes spreading on the hills in a variety of greens, as if they are the visible manifestation of foot and mouth disease encircling an uninfected enclave that must inevitably succumb, though I know they are only caused by controlled burnings, in different years, for the sake of the game birds. The farmlands below are no longer in their beauty an outward expression of our love but a glimpse of another world, perfect, unattainable, where unknown people are happy. But we do our best, Jack and I: we ignore the evidence, as we have done for thirty years, and we fly our brave flag with our initials entwined.