

## Listener

Further on down the road the trench digger's engine became silent. Peter laid aside his shovel, wiped the sweat from his brow and picked out a paper bag from his toolbox. Still warm, the beef and pastry were fair reward for the morning's work.

There was no one in sight, either east to the gully of Binscarth or west beneath Hoy's proud purple back. The fields glowed violent green, waiting to be cut.

Peter leaned against the mottled dyke by the lengths of bright blue pipe his gaze fixed on a far spot where the seals sometimes rest ashore. Suddenly, there was a voice close to his ear with the burr of a wandering bee.

'Find anything?'

The shock made Peter stumble away from the wall. He shook his head in answer.

Seeing the stranger's bicycle and recovering his wits, Peter offered forward his piece. The man broke off a share. His fingers were soft and pink, out of place with his weatherbeaten face and faded cap and jacket.

The stranger squinted towards the brackish loch.

'I know this place,' he said.

Peter didn't care to know more about this particular place. There was a strangeness to this stretch of road, as if time was different here.

Beyond the water in the depression between the hills were the standing stones and the new archaeological dig. Things had been found that in his opinion should be left in peace.

But it was here, where the road came close to the single giant stone next to an old sycamore that Peter felt most uneasy. The stone was wedged like a knife thrown into the ground and had a lopsided point that mimicked the head of a man with an outstretched arm.

‘You found them,’ said the stranger. ‘You heard their whisper.’

Peter’s heart pounded.

An oystercatcher’s flat staccato broke over the field, rising in tempo to an infinity of noise, and then just as suddenly it was gone.

The stranger talked in a low voice, irresistible and melodic, his lips close to Peter’s ear, his gaze strolling the distant shore of the loch.

‘A long time ago this was their home, when for five summers in a row the grass grew high and lush. Winter rushed past in a handful of weeks before light returned and the animals bore young. It was in the second of these summers that twins were seen in every animal.

‘Life came forth from every corner: cats sprawled with kittens, great baskets of fish were hauled in, lambs and calves too big to be delivered naturally were pulled from their mothers; crows feasted on the afterbirths.

‘The abundance troubled only one man, Abner the storyteller. He distrusted nature’s bounty and a heavy depression lay upon him. No one had been surprised when his wife Callista conceived and delivered healthy twins – though her moonblood had lost its rhythm years ago. A toast of fresh ale was drunk and they were named Helka and Halvor.

‘During those five years not a single child died, neither by fever, chills or accident. There was no need for tales of trows to explain lost children, no one cared about the journeys of the dead. The continuation of life was assured.

‘As they grew the young twins begged Abner for stories, but he shook his head, amusing them instead by making croatie-buckies appear behind their ears.’

- *You must find him. Put the kai in a line, so I can pass easily from one to the other.*
- *Surely, it does not matter. There are so many.*
- *Don't you understand, it must be all!*

‘Only when the twins pulled Abner out of his woven chair would he venture outside. There he would watch their elder brother bending low in the barley. Sigurd smiled to see his father outside and came in from the field with a stumbling gait.

‘Sigurd had been conceived nearly twenty years before in a summer of drought. He was born after a severe winter when many animals and men succumbed to the cold sleep of death.

‘Callista who had been so proud, Callista who had been the most beautiful of women that winter as her belly grew, had cried out in despair when she saw her baby's bent-double foot, his shrivelled corkscrew leg.

‘In that first year of Sigurd's life she had been caught between love and hate for the baby. Every time Abner left their hut he searched the darkness in her eyes before leaving mother and son together. Time passed and Abner never thought to have more children. Sigurd the Lamé fought through illness, pain and ridicule.’

- *Women, bring the vessels. Children, the garlands.*
- *We must do what he says.*

- *Fine beast though.*
- *Good in calf.*
- *Mind on, milk and butter too.*
- *Hush women! Why am I kept waiting!*

‘Above all, Sigurd loved his mother. He noticed that when he was outdoors and acted like other boys she sang as she tended the fire. He grew determined not to become a storyteller.

‘Callista marvelled at his increasing strength. But as Abner watched, he saw his son was more than a farmer.’

- *The sun touches the horizon, her patience run out!*
- *What can we do?*
- *We will honour Helka and Halvor instead! Bring a new garland. The sun will not wait.*

‘A quiet temper does not mean a lack of feeling. No one who knew Sigurd well would have spoken to him as rashly as the stranger who stayed that fifth corpulent summer.

‘Welch arrived in the lengthening days of spring. He had no desire to work, nothing to trade; he was handsome and made his living telling stories.

‘He told dark voluptuous tales that made women’s eyes glassy, their mouths dry and their wombs tight. He told stories of weapons and war that swelled men’s hearts and tantalised the young. He told of wicked rulers, lost innocence, passion and blood.

‘For his listeners the gloaming came unnoticed, night fell unheeded. In morning the bright doorway pained their eyes, their stomachs were empty, their throats parched but still they stayed.’

‘At first Callista returned to her own fire, scolding her husband, “Why do you allow a stranger to usurp your place? Why must you sit mute all day?”

‘But her mind lingered over Welch’s stories. She cleaned and cooked without diligence, half-listening to the twin’s babble. Soon, there was no supper waiting for Sigurd when he returned from the fields, no butter or cheese made from the buckets of milk brought to the hearth.

‘Father and son sat over an empty table while the twins splashed each other with milk. Sigurd shook his head and rose to his feet.

‘Droplets of hair clung to his cloak as he tramped to the Listening House. When he drew back the cloth over the door a dozen impatient eyes turned briefly from Welch toward him. Inside the air was fuggy and close, the smell of urine and sweat rose from the listener’s bodies.

‘Sigurd moved through them in his slip-shod way, easing aside the folk at Welch’s feet. “Mother, we’re hungry,” he said. But Callista did not move.’

– *The twins will have the honour of being first.*

– *Hold the basin. Catch the blood to sow the new harvest.*

‘She blinked, confused by the interruption. Her cheeks were flushed, her body tense. “No one is kept there against their will, Sigurd,” said Welch. “You must come home, mother,’ Sigurd repeated. ‘His stories are not good like father’s. You must all go home.’”

‘A few listeners squinted towards the door, perhaps remembering where they should be. Welch uncrossed his legs and stood, his face level with Sigurd’s, a sly smile on his lips, “No one wants to go.”

‘Sigurd half closed his eyes, as if to acquiesce then with a quick movement he grabbed Welch’s tunic, pulled up the cloth and thrust down the cord around his waist revealing the goosey flesh and bearded face of his manhood, the girlish pink of his nipples.

‘Welch cried out like a virgin, but Sigurd held off his struggles. He made sure everyone could see the specimen that had beguiled them. “Look at the man!” he called out.

‘A sharp pain in Sigurd’s arm forced him to release his grip. Welch’s mouth was red with blood. Sigurd turned away in anger and disgust.

‘He walked past his mother out into the mist. A handful of listeners formed a knot by the door and watched him go. Eventually, they returned inside.’

– *It’s Sigurd’s fault.*

– *It had to be done. He didn’t listen.*

‘Sigurd returned to his father. He concocted a sort of flat barley bread and they ate it together; the twins drank milk. Sigurd bound his wound, but it festered and soon became another useless limb.

‘The injury to Welch’s pride enkindled in him an excitable, wicked power and from that evening he sowed a new mania in his listener’s minds. Sigurd feared what was coming and took his animals to the wetlands. His kai lay among the wild iris like brown scars on the earth.

‘At dusk on solstice they slit and bled the kai. In place of Sigurd’s animals they sacrificed Helka and Halvor.’

– *The harvest is sown with blood.*

– *The harvest is secured.*

– *The harvest is saved.*

‘A week later Sigurd saw the cloud embrace the moon like a long lost child; he knew catastrophe had come and passed. He ground a poppy head between his palms and drizzled the black seeds on the earth. It was time for the reckoning.

‘He found the earth black with blood and crows. Abner was alone in their hut. “Where are Helka and Halvor?” asked Sigurd. “They were the harvest,” said Abner. These were his final words.

‘Sigurd searched the circle of stiff-legged kai, gagging at the smell. He found the twins embraced under a withered garland of red campion, pale and perfect, untouched by the crows. He bound them together with his cloak and carried them to a secret place.

‘Once they were buried he returned directly to the Listening House. Inside, the people murmured and wept, holding each other in the shadows, their faces shrunken and distorted. Huddled in the centre was Welch. He chattered and raved, pouring fourth sound like an animal going out of its mind. Sigurd carried him outside.

‘The crows flew in great wheeling arcs overhead while he bound Welch’s arms and legs. He swung the gabbling man over his shoulder and began to walk. The swaying and muttering crowd following behind. Sigurd carried Welch around the loch, to the foot of the western hills. He tore off the branches of an old sycamore tree and bound Welch to its trunk, one arm free, his head and shoulders proud.

‘Sigurd turned to the crowd, “Come. Leave this bitter harvest.” Seeing his mother he put out his hand, and she followed him.

‘They left Welch to die; the crows pecked out his eyes and tongue as if he were a caddy lamb. The hard times began, years of starvation, sickness and grief.

‘Sigurd took his father’s place and his stories were hope and life. Eventually, only the land remembered the harvest of blood. Rare sensitive souls hear an echo, the whisper of the twins final comfort to each other.’

‘I could tell they were old...’ said Peter, in an uneven voice. ‘ I didn’t have the heart...I covered them over.’

Peter moved his hand back to his shovel, but the storyteller caught his arm and spoke urgently, ‘Do not worry that you feel like an ordinary man, Peter. Live without apology, live with your hands open. Because the love is in the risk.’

The storyteller slowly released him, then looked up and down the road.

‘Time has been stopped long enough.’

He limped back to his bicycle, and with his one strong arm lifted it clear from the weeds. Peter watched him go until he was no more than a speck wavering in the mid-summer haze.