Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

The Witness

Written by

James Jauncey

Published by

Picador

All text is copyright of the author

Please print off and read at your leisure.

ONE

By the time John MacNeil was eighteen he had grown used to silence. The hours he had spent on the hill, often alone, in all weathers, had taken care of that. But there was something about the silence this morning that unsettled him. Made him feel as if the world was slowing, would soon stop spinning altogether.

Unfamiliar snow drifted among the pines, piling up along the top of the tumbledown dyke, draping the bushes and dead bracken. The cart rumbled and swayed, its cargo of snow-coated logs shifting this way and that.

But it was not the snowfall that was troubling him, rare though it was these days. There was something else in the air. Hector, plodding between the traces of the cart, could feel it too. He snorted and steam issued from his nostrils.

As they approached the top of the brae the old grey garron halted and shook his head. John could feel Hector's weight settle, his hooves rooting stubbornly to earth.

He gave the reins a flick, muttered a few words of encouragement. But Hector would not budge. With a sigh, John dismounted and walked forward to grasp the bridle, to turn pony and cart for home. But Hector stiffened, ears

suddenly pricked. John stood still. At first he could hear nothing but Hector's breathing. Then came a distant thud-thudding, faint but insistent.

He waited, blinking snowflakes from his eyelashes, listening intently. He knew how to listen; the silence had taught him that. Now the sound was coming closer. He turned Hector towards the trees, the cart creaking and shuddering as it left the track. But the ground was firm here, in among the spacious pines. In a short while they were sheltered by the tall trees, their outlines blurred by the snow, as good as invisible. He rested his hand on Hector's steaming, muscular neck, feeling the coarse damp coat beneath his palm.

'OK, mon. We'll just wait up here a minute. See what's what.'

A tremor ran down Hector's flanks. He snorted again, flaring his nostrils. John stroked him and murmured reassurance.

The thudding reached a crescendo and something huge sidled overhead, almost clipping the treetops. John pulled Hector's head close to his chest and blew on his quivering muzzle. The helicopter slipped down the brae to land in the field at the bottom, whipping up a maelstrom of snow around it.

He waited till Hector was calm again, then made his way forward to the top of the slope, where he paused in the shelter of a tree. He reached into his coat pocket for a pair of small binoculars. Pulling his coat around him, he lay down in the snow at the foot of the tree and brought them up to his eyes.

At the far edge of the field a number of grey stone buildings clustered by the roadside. Beyond ran the river. This was Blackriggs, a hamlet that had grown up around what

was once a farm of that name. Today the farmhouse was a hotel that had done brisk business until the troubles started and the tourists stopped coming. Now only the public bar remained open, for the locals. Across the yard from the hotel, the main farm-steading had been converted into a small general store with a forecourt where coupons could be exchanged for fuel, when there was any to be had. Several of the outlying buildings had been turned into apartments and on the opposite side of the road was a row of four farm cottages that backed on to the river bank. Beyond and slightly apart, as if tolerated but not welcomed by the older buildings, a pair of modern single-storey houses stood on their own small plots. The whole place was cradled by woodland. In the snowy dimness, the trees seemed dark and oppressive.

He kept the binoculars trained on the helicopter as it began to disgorge soldiers. Its fuselage was dented and shabby, and one skid was bent. Something had leaked a rust-coloured smear across its insignia, the diagonal white cross and blue background of the Saltire. The soldiers loitered just out of range of the downdraught, clouds of fine snow swirling around their legs. They wore their green battle fatigues casually, handled their weapons with a certain nonchalance. John squinted, frowned and adjusted the binoculars. In closer focus some of the men looked swarthy and foreign.

A large sergeant was the last to emerge, barking orders as his feet hit the ground. With his solid build and florid complexion, there was nothing foreign-seeming about him. The men straightened up and started towards the buildings at a saunter. A figure appeared in the doorway of one of the cottages, looked out, then withdrew. The snow was easing now. Two soldiers moved ahead to position

themselves where the trees met the road beyond the farm buildings. Two more made their way in the opposite direction and stationed themselves on the far side of the bungalows. Both exits were sealed now.

It was a house-to-house search, that much was soon clear. He could not hear a great deal because the helicopter had its engines still running, the idling rotors now spinning a thin drift of snow across the open ground. But he could see soldiers starting to bang on doors, being met by anxious faces, shouldering their way inside. The sergeant stood in the centre of the road, rifle under arm, directing operations, it seemed.

Whatever they were looking for, they didn't seem to be finding it. The casualness was starting to turn to frustration. Front doors were slammed, garden gates kicked open. One man stopped to piss behind a hedge in full view of the cottage he had just left. The sergeant shouted at him and eventually he moved on, zipping himself up as he went. Another lingered in the doorway of the general store. Eyeing up the checkout lass with the big tits, no doubt. An elderly man with a small dog walked out of one of the apartments. At once a soldier ran towards him, weapon levelled. The old fellow dropped the dog-lead, fluttering his hands in alarm as he was prodded back indoors at rifle-point. The dog scampered off.

Now two soldiers were walking up the road from the bungalows, a tall older man and a burly younger man with corporal's stripes and a swagger. They had a woman between them, half dragging her. The sergeant strolled over and appeared to start questioning her. She shook her head vehemently. The burly young corporal struck her in the face. Her head dropped. The sergeant repeated his question. The corporal raised his fist to strike her again, and for

a moment John sensed something familiar about the movement, the threatening posture. But before he could focus on the young man's face, the hotel door was flung open and a grey-haired woman emerged. The hotel-keeper's wife. She strode towards them, her indignation plain to see. She stopped in front of the group and started to remonstrate with the sergeant.

He listened for a while, then raised his hand and spoke. Whatever he said to her, it made her throw her fingertips to her mouth in dismay. The sergeant summoned two more soldiers and indicated that they should remove her. But the hotel-keeper's wife turned with dignity and started to walk away. The soldiers followed her and grabbed her by the arms. She struggled to turn, to voice her outrage to the sergeant. But then something caused all eyes to be raised to the top floor of the hotel. The sergeant barked a command and one of the soldiers raised his weapon and fired a burst. Glass exploded from an upper window. Splinters of wood and masonry flew in all directions. Twisted half round between her escorts, the hotel-keeper's wife stopped struggling and stared. Following her gaze, John realised that it was Gordon's room the soldier had fired into. Gordon, her half-witted son, John's former schoolmate. Now bottle-washer, occasional porter, sometimes even, God help the customers, relief barman.

At a further command from the sergeant three more soldiers sprinted across the yard and burst into the hotel.

For several moments all went quiet. John chafed his frozen fingers, stiff and cramped from gripping the binoculars. The blood flowed back and his hands began to tremble. He steadied himself and raised the glasses again as two of the soldiers reappeared from the hotel, dragging with them a struggling figure. They pushed him to the

ground in front of the sergeant. He raised himself to his knees and looked up in confusion.

Now the third soldier emerged from the hotel and joined the group. Half a head shorter than the sergeant, he wore a thick moustache and his dark hair escaped untidily from beneath his beret. He began speaking to the sergeant, who listened then shook his head. The man with the moustache persisted, waving his hands. Again the sergeant shook his head, more emphatically. The man with the moustache turned on his heel with a furious gesture. Started to walk away. Then spun round, raised his weapon and fired a single shot into Gordon's stomach. He fell forward, mouth gaping in agony. Restrained by their guards, the two women looked on in horror.

For a moment the sergeant stood in stunned silence. Then another door opened at the far end of the steading. A figure appeared, glanced at the soldiers and began to run towards them, waving his arms and shouting. The hotel-keeper. His wife came out of her trance, shook her head and opened her mouth to warn him. But he paid no heed. The soldier with the moustache swung round and trained his rifle on the running figure. The sergeant also recovered himself. He turned, gesturing to the man with the moustache to hold his fire, and shouted at the hotel-keeper, who ran on. The sergeant started to shout again. The man with the moustache jerked his head in contempt and fired. The rifle kicked twice in his hands.

The running man staggered and pitched headlong down.

Released by her guards, his wife sank to her knees in the snow.

TWO

Not until long after the firing had stopped was John able to move, frozen hands shuddering as he lowered the binoculars. He could have been lying there for minutes or hours. He wouldn't have known. He climbed to his feet and looked around. No sign of Hector or the cart. He walked back on to the track, numbly following the trail of spilt logs homewards. Wishing his father would be there. Wishing anyone would be there so he wouldn't have to be alone with what he had seen. It felt as if he had swallowed something huge and poisonous.

The sky had cleared now. Late afternoon sunlight slanted through the pines, glinting palely on the snow, so unfamiliar in this warming world that its whiteness seemed almost miraculous.

Hector was waiting at the cabin, still attached to the empty cart, scraping away at the snow with his front hoof to get at the mossy grass. He looked up and gave a low whinny. John unhitched him, led him into the lean-to stable at the back of the cabin and fetched an armful of hay. Then, as Hector munched, he buried his head in the dusty mane and let the tears of shock and outrage come.

Some time later he went inside. He took off his coat and boots and wandered from room to room in his socks, unable to settle, picking things up and putting them down again. *Fifteen minutes later and he would have been down there in Blackriggs himself.* Panic surged inside him. The walls and furniture seemed suddenly strange, as if his inner compass had seized and he'd lost his bearings. He cursed his dad for having chosen this weekend to go visiting in Aberdeen. Picked up the phone in the vain hope that it might be back on again, and fingered the keypad with a sudden longing for the comfort of his mother's voice, two hundred and fifty miles away in Newcastle. Tears welled up again as he wondered what on earth he should do, tried to imagine what his father would do, racked his brains till they ached and the same answer came again and again: there's nothing you can do except stay put and keep your head down till he gets back.

He flung himself down on the settee, switched on the television and selected the news preset button. There was only one news channel these days. Channel One. The government had closed down all the others once the rebel Northern Land Alliance had stepped up their campaign and the fighting had begun in earnest under the leadership of the shadowy figure known only as the Tod, Scots for the Fox. Not that lack of reliable information had done anything to dampen people's support for the NLA, as they were commonly called, in their struggle to win back the Highlands from the hated Department of Land. Not round here anyway.

He watched for thirty minutes to be sure he caught a full bulletin. Reports were starting to come in that linked the identity of the Tod with that of the billionaire Swiss-based financier, Struan Fraser. The army was interviewing sus-

pected rebel sympathisers in Inverness, following a second consecutive night's disturbances on the Springfield housing estate. Another electricity substation had been sabotaged, this time in Dingwall. The authorities were in discussion with the oil companies about providing armed escort for northbound fuel tankers. A mass protest against the One Acre Act had been broken up by police outside the Parliament building at Holyrood. And just a few minutes ago the NLA had issued an apology for the downing three days ago of an army helicopter full of journalists over the eastern Grampians.

John drummed his fingers on the arm of the settee and closed his eyes as the voice droned on. He could clearly picture the moment when the twin insects had suddenly floated up above the heathery flank of a hill, crabbing across a pale November sky not three miles from here, the ground beneath them suddenly alive with panicking deer. His dad and he, the deerstalker and his apprentice, were lying up in an old peat hag, cursing the spoiled shot, when out of the corner of one eye John saw something streak across the blue. The leading helicopter erupted with a roar, in a ball of orange flame. For a heartbeat it hung there in the air. Then greasy black smoke plumed upwards and twisted metal rained down on the earth. There were dark doll shapes among the tumbling debris, the spits and gobbets of fire. The other helicopter swung around and hovered above the wreckage, then settled alongside it . . . There was an elbow in his ribs and his father's urgent whisper: 'Time tae shoot the craw, son.' Before uniformed figures had begun to jump out of the helicopter, the two of them had slipped away down the peat hag and were gone.

Investigations into the incident were ongoing, concluded the bulletin. Special forces continued to conduct a

thorough search of the surrounding area and a number of suspected terrorists had been taken in for questioning.

John felt sickened by the lie. *Suspected terrorists . . . taken in for questioning.* This wasn't one of those Third World countries where innocent people simply disappeared, swept up by brutal security forces never to be seen again. This, as Mrs Farquharson had constantly reminded them, was a sovereign, independent nation, proud and forward-looking in the early years of the twenty-first century. This was Scotland, cradle of the Enlightenment – whatever that meant – the home of Rabbie Burns, who believed all men to be equal, 'a man's a man for a' that', and the host of other civilised qualities that Mrs Farquharson had done her best to drum into them during the weekly nationhood classes in sixth year. And yet . . . something had gone wrong. He could see it quite clearly now, everything that had been wearing his father down for so long. Until today, of course, it hadn't really touched him. Annoying and inconvenient, yes, but mostly for the disruption it caused to the band. It was impossible to organise gigs when the phones worked only half the time, you couldn't rely on getting fuel and even if you managed to get yourself to the venue the event was quite likely to be brought to a halt by a power cut. Still, every other band in the Highlands was in the same boat, and as a result the live sessions in the pubs were enjoying a short-lived boom, people turning up on pushbikes with fiddles and guitars, accordions and mandolins and bodhrans strapped to their backs and even, in the case of Charlie Coulter, a double bass fitted with wheels. Short-lived, though, because now there was a rumour that the sessions were going to be banned. People were starting to sing rebel songs, getting stirred up, and the authorities didn't like it . . .

But none of that was life-threatening. And even when the Department of Land pay cheques had finally stopped coming and John and his father had started having to fend for themselves, selling logs and illegal haunches of venison to their neighbours, John had found something almost exciting about it, the idea of living off the land, living by their wits. There had been days out on the hill with the rifle, or back at the cabin splitting logs, when he could have imagined himself one of the old American frontiersmen.

But not any longer. Not now . . .

He got up from the settee and went into the kitchen area, opened the cupboard where his dad kept the whisky and poured himself a large shot. The first gulp burned his throat and made him cough, but he forced himself to down the fiery liquid in two more gulps and immediately poured himself some more. It made his legs feel weak and sent a glowing heat through his stomach. He ought to try to eat something, he thought.

He turned on the cooker and put the pot of venison stew on the ring to heat. Then, still holding the glass, he wandered unsteadily from the living room into the passage and leaned against the doorway of the cabin's back room, with its familiar smells of glue and wood shavings. He took another mouthful of whisky and as it seared its way to his belly gazed blindly at the shapes on the workbench.

He stood there for a long time. When he eventually turned away, as if on cue, the electricity died. He stood still, immobilised in the darkness, listening to his own breathing. Then, as he moved towards the shelf where the candles were kept, the faintest flicker intruded. He glanced towards the window. There was electricity of a different kind at play out there. He went to the door and stepped outside, feeling the cold air shrivel his scalp as he turned to face the north,

where a diaphanous curtain hung low in the night sky. Aurora Borealis. Ghostly and billowing, a shifting veil of greens and purples and blues that seemed to be saying that what happened this afternoon was merely a prelude.

He shivered and turned to the cabin again, pausing for a moment on the threshold as a skein of late-homing geese went creaking overhead in the frosty, flickering darkness.