

Naebody'd Seen Him

by James Robertson

He pushes off with the balls of his feet, and the swivel chair rolls across the carpet from his desk to the huge floor-to-ceiling window. Sunshine beats in from a hazy blue sky, but air-conditioning keeps the room cool. Twenty storeys down is the city – smoky, grimy, noisy, bustling. When he comes up out of it in the elevator it's as if he's leaving one world and entering another. It's as if the two are not joined, but they are. There's a staircase, concrete and barren, the route everybody's supposed to use in the event of fire.

Sometimes, at the end of the day, he takes those stairs. He's always alone when he does. Sometimes he picks up speed and swings himself round on the handrail at each turn, jumping the flights like a teenager. Once, someone caught him at it, a cleaner. She gave him a look, a smile. He acknowledged this sheepishly, walked the next flight like a sensible, powerful man, then started jumping again.

There are floors and floors of folk below him. Some of them

work for him, some of them don't. He hardly ever sees these people. They hardly ever see him. How did he get all the way up here? He knows, of course, the bare facts: he can read his entry in the on-line business directories, and it's impressive but it doesn't impress him. How he really got here was another kind of journey.

There is a place he can slip back to and say, *Aye, I ken ye*. And the place speaks to him likewise: *Aye, I ken ye*. Any time of the day or night he can step out of his body and be away...

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...Oot the door and doon tae the yett. Alang the street, past the blin wummin's hoose, the doctor's hoose, the hoose wi the twa nippy-yappy duggs ahint the fence – wee terrors, aye gie him a fleg even when he minds they're there. Left ontae the reid path, past the auld fitbaw field whaur naebody plays ony mair, ower the brig and ontae the cairt track that rins through the fairy widds. Lang time since a cairt wis on it. Langer still since fairies bade in the widds. Fairies – the real yins, no thae flichterlichties in spangly frocks – are fou o ill ploys. If they find ye sleepin at a door intae their warld, they'll tak ye awa for seeven year, mak a slave o ye. He's read aboot this in a buik frae the library. He disna believe it, no quite.

Up amang the aiks and beeches is an auld stane place, like a

castle but wee, mair like a rampart wi a room and a hauf-biggit touer. He scrambled up tae it yince, gey fykie it wis tae win tae, and when he did there wis nae stair in the touer and the room smelt o deid things. *The folly*, folk cry it. Some lairdie pit it up but didna feenish it, never meant tae. It wis whit ye did in thae days if ye had plenty siller, plenty land and nae sense, ye pit up a ruin. It wis supposed tae be romantic.

The cairt track staps at the auld kirk. Jist a wee place, nae ruif, three waws, a gable-end wi a hole whaur the bell jowed, cryin the folk tae their worship. The yaird is fou o stanes, some lyin jist as they were laid, some staunin ajee, some cowpit ower. Aw thae banes and sauls ablow the gress, and the gress green and rich and the grund sinkin unner yer feet like a saft mattress. On hot, dry days he lies there and thinks it a guid place for a lang sleep, and yin time he did faw asleep and woke and didna ken for a moment if he wis in the warld or oot o it, and he thocht o the fairies but he wisna feart. At nicht shairly there'd be bats fleein about, mibbe a hoolet whaur the bell yince wis, luikin doon amang the stanes for wee craiteurs gaun about in the gress, chancin their lives amang the human deid. But he's never seen the hoolet, or the baukies, for he's never been there at nicht.

Ayont the kirk is the muir road, twistin itsel up the stey brae. It taks the braith oot o him and wechts his legs as if they're clad in leid. Up on the muir is the loch whaur folk walk their dugs. There's an island wi a swans' nest, year efter year they come back, and Lang Sandy the heron fishin tae, and deuks amang the reeds, and in simmer thoosans o puddocks, that thick on the grund ye canna help steppin on them. And on the faur side o the loch is the hill.

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Hame wis an auld stane hoose in an auld stane village. It wis aye rainin. Aw through his bairnhood it rained. Sometimes it snawed or the sun birsled doon, but maistly it rained. He aye seemed tae be luikin oot at the endless rain through this windae or thon. The ruifs o ither hooses hirkled unner the clouds as if they were feart frae them. But he kent there wis mair, there had tae be. Atween the village and the clouds lay a warld: widds, burns, lochs, hills. Beasts and birds. Cities. Awa frae the smeerit gless o the windae, ayont the dreepin rones and iley tarmac and rotten fences, mibbe the rain widna be sae weet. Or it widna fash ye, yince ye were oot in it. Sae oot he went, and it didna. He wis dry or he wis drookit, and it didna muckle maitter which.

Sometimes he cam hame and naebody'd even clocked he'd been awa. But ither times they did, if he'd been oot for oors, missed his denner, missed his tea, then there wis shoutin and yellin, even a skelp on the lug. They were feart, his da and his ma, that's whit he thocht: feart for him, feart for theirsels. And whit made them mad at him wisna his gaun awa, it wis his comin hame. *Whaur were ye? How did ye no tell us? Worried seik, we've been. Whaur were ye?* But mibbe aw they wantit wis tae escape tae, same as himsel, and they couldna. They were ower auld, hauden doon wi responsibility, stuck in their weys. He didna say jist whaur he had been. He didna richt ken. *Oot*, he said. *Up in the widds*, he said. *And whit were ye daein?* *Nuthin*, he said. *Jist gaun aboot*. And it wis true. *Ye're some laddie*, his faither said, when he'd calmed doon. *A gaun aboot laddie. Ye spend yer life in a dwam*. And that wis true anaw.

There wis anither buik he fund in the library, pure chance, he opened it and stertit tae read, and couldna stop. A boy wis walkin by a river in the Hielans. Awa up yonder. Years syne, this wis. The boy saw a fish, a big saumon. The fish belanged the river. The river belanged the laird. Tae hell wi that! In efter it went the boy, plungin and plashin frae pool tae daurk pool. This cairried on for pages. The saumon wis mair nor a fish, the boy wis mair nor a boy. They bade

in a time and place he didna ken, but somehow he kent *them*. The boy chased the fish till he had it cornered, taigelt, bate. But there wis somethin else, a kinna luv atween the twa o them, that wis whit the buik seemed tae be sayin, even though the saumon wid dee. But whit did he ken aboot luv then, its kindness and its cruelty? Aboot the same as he kent aboot the Hielans. And the buik had him cleekit, like a fish. Jist wurd aff a page but they had him.

It wis aboot bein outside, seekin somethin ither. And the mither's quick question when the boy brocht the muckle fish hame, sharin the secret, fauldin him intae hersel: *Did anyone see you?*

Whit wid it be like tae hae a mither that luvd ye like thon, a faither prood o the theft that wisna theft? But his ain mither wis *worried seik*, and his ain faither gied him a skelp and tellt him he wis a dreamer. That wis luv tae, nae doot, but o a different kind. And *he* wis different. He wantit tae walk awa frae awthin that he kent. Tae the hills, tae a city, tae somewhaur that wisna...*there*.

The question kept comin back: *Did anyone see you?* He played wi it, turnt it aroon. *Did you see anyone?* If he didna seen onybody mibbe naebody saw him. And if *that* wis true mibbe he could be invisible, mibbe he could melt awa. He wantit tae gang through life like that, tae be in a place and syne disappear, reappear some ither

place. He wantit tae be able tae say, *Naebody saw me.*

There wis ae Sunday in winter that wis black snaw and frozent tyre marks on the streets, but pure white and skinklin on the hills. He woke and luiked oot the windae and saw the licht on them. Awbody else in the hoose wis aye sleepin. He pit on his claes and slippit oot. Alang the street, through the widds, past the kirk, up the brae, ontae the muir. A thin stourin o snaw lay on the iced-ower loch. He skiffed stanes ower the ice and the loch boomed back at him. And the hill, sherp, craggy, fierce wi black rock, wis cawin him on.

He climbed fast, and sune awthin ablow him wis wee and no real. Nae wind at aw. He speeled up through the cauld air intae a domain o silence. No a bird, no a craitur tae be seen. As the hill grew mair stey he grew closer tae it, a cowlin, creepin thing on his fingirs and taes. The snaw scrunched less and less unner him, till it wis hard-packed and he went ower it inch by inch, then it wis aw jist ice and he wis on his knees, his fingirs scrafflin for a grip and his feet sprauchlin on the edges o rocks. The loch when he luiked back wis a splatch o skailt milk on a white claith. His bitts skited awa frae him and he felt a wee bit seik wi fear but he wisna gaun back noo, he forced himsel tae keep makkin thae inchin steps up the wey. Then the ice thinned and he wis on bald, gritty rock, and he

stuid and stauchered the last few feet tae the tap.

There wis a cairn, the ae side happit in hard snaw, the tither clear. He leant on it and luiked oot on a haill warld. Tae the north, mair hills, bigger, aw white. Tae the sooth, oot o sicht, Embra, Glesca, Lunnon. Thoosans o miles tae the west, New York. Doon on the flat land though, that wis hame: the black lines o roads, hedges, fences, the river; touns and villages and fermes. He held his haun oot forenent his een and a ferm disappeared. He pit doon his haun and it kythed yince mair. A haill warld wis oot there, and naebody in it but himsel – if he wis in it. *Noo ye see me, noo ye dinna.* And cauld though it wis he sat a lang while, his feet turnin tae blocks, his lugs burnin, the hairs in his neb hardenin wi ilka braith he tuik. Then he stertit tae wark his wey doon, roon the back o the hill whaur the sun wis beginnin tae saften the ice.

They were up and aboot in the kitchen when he creepit in but he jaloused they thocht he wis aye in his bed. Aff wi his bitts, up the stair he snuved, oot o his claes and unner the blankets. He wis jist aboot asleep when a whilie efter cam the cry, *Are ye gettin up the day?* But he'd beaten them tae it. He'd been oot and back in, up the hill and doon, and the magical thing had happened: *naebody'd seen him.*

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He remembers a man he respected, an older man, telling him something once when he was starting out. *Everything goes in seven-year cycles*, the man said, and he's found it to be true. He can pour out his life like drams, in seven-year measures: the first job after school, the first company, the first acquisition, the first marriage, the first million, the second marriage, the first ten million, the big merger. Time goes so quickly, however you measure it. Where has it all gone? Where is it all going? In the minutes since he pushed himself over to the window another forty emails will have come into his PA's in-box. She'll reply to some, filter out the trivia. At midday she'll come in and talk him through the ones he needs to know about. There'll be phone-calls, appointments. At one o' clock he is due to go to lunch with someone, he can't remember who. No doubt it's important.

Lately he has been wondering about that word *important*, and what it means. He thinks about what a life – any life – is built on, and how easily it can all come tumbling down. More and more he finds himself just wanting to stop for a minute, to close his eyes, step out of himself and be away.

There is a place. It looks, smells, tastes, feels and sounds

different from where he is. It isn't better or worse, just different.

He wonders if it's still as he remembers it.

One of these days, he'll go back – physically, really go back –
and take a look.