

# Mångata

by

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Euan walks down to Camasunary Bay. His pack sways like a lazy metronome, he treads in time. The path is etched with land veins that weave from a high loch, down to the sea. Day sets down its instruments and there is a pause, a tuning, before the night begins its movement. Euan strides through the interval, through the unfurling dusk wind, towards the bay. The sea ebbs in his skin like a blood-bruise. Not far now.

He looks down at the bay, bordered by mountains that circle like wary dogs, spines arched and pale. There is a structure; an ink smear on the land that wavers in the salt-mist. He knows it from his childhood. Bothy-hopping, his father called it; wandering across the country, sleeping in these abandoned places at the edge of the world. Growing up, he and his family had stayed in so many. Now, he is returning to them, one by one. This is the last.

The land flattens as the dark moon opens like a seal's eye. The bothy coils from the ink smear, a quiet sentinel looking out to sea. The ground is boggy, and Euan feels the grey mud seep through his boots and wet his socks as he treads on. Ahead, the door comes into view. A memory: he and his sister racing to be the first inside. Natasha. He sees her now, bolting ahead, silhouette shrinking. She bursts inside and closes the door behind her. She is singing a song to tease him. He hears her now, as he rests his grimed hand on the doorlatch. He throws open the door.

No one there. Two empty rooms yawn at him, one with a table, another with a raised platform for sleeping. He slings off his pack and lays it on the table, taking out his stove. He boils some pasta, and in the amber stove light, watches through the window as the waves blur the shoreline. There is a thrust of shattered stone that wends out into the sea; a finger of land seeking another.

He rubs his eyes, tired from the long walk. Standing, he gazes around the bothy and sees a glimmer in the corner. A metal box. Paint flakes from it, and in the dark wells, rust bristles like mould. There is no lock. Anyone may stay in a bothy; there is no knowing who could have left it. Wreathed in the flickering stove light, Euan approaches the box and kneels. He puts out a hand and rests it on the lid, feeling the warped and cracking paint, cold against his palm. A memory surfaces like a drowned body rising, bloated, to the surface. He inhales sharply, opens the box.

Chocolate bars. Tea bags. Biscuits. Supplies left by kind wanderers. Euan smiles, then closes his eyes and stands. There is a rule: if you take something, you leave something behind. So far, Euan has taken nothing. He comes and goes like a shadow. He shuts the lid, and returns to his stove.

As he eats his pasta, he hears the wind murmur from over the sea, hears the sob of water over sand, hears the door open.

He straightens. "Hello?"

The stove is out, and the only light is a silver streak from the window. The doorway is in darkness.

“Cold out,” says the stranger. They step into the room, and in the window light, a sea-glow rimes their skin. A man, older than Euan, wearing a long coat. He lowers his hood and moves to the table, sitting beside Euan to remove his boots. His greying hair hangs in lank strands. After he kicks off his boots, he offers a hand to Euan. “Nick,” he says.

“Euan.”

They shake.

“Colder than a well-digger’s arse,” says Nick.

Euan laughs.

“Dram?” Nick reaches into his coat and produces a flask.

“What is it?”

Nick drinks from the flask and sighs, “Good stuff.” He plants the flask on the table and runs his hands through his hair. In profile, he has a hooked nose, a chin like a crescent moon, and heavy-lidded eyes. His skin is wind burnished and red.

Euan takes the flask and offers his bowl of pasta in return. Nick takes it greedily.

They eat and drink in silence, before Euan asks, “Where you from?”

Nick wipes his mouth. “North.” He reaches into his pocket and takes out a red woollen cap, pulling it down over his brow.

“Glencoe,” says Euan.

Nick smiles and sets the bowl down on the table with a clank. He takes the flask from Euan and stands, wandering to the window and looking out at the shore. “Did you see all the debris across the bay? Bottles, glass, rope and such.” He drinks from the flask and sighs. “It just washes up here. Beautiful sometimes. When the light hits it right. Like a broken mosaic.”

“Hadn’t thought of it like that.”

Nick drinks again and tosses the flask to Euan.

Euan catches it and grins. “My father said sharing a drink with a stranger is a sacred thing.”

“Aye,” says Nick. “We must look out for each other. There’s a code.”

Euan feels warmth radiate through his limbs. He takes off his coat and tucks his hands into his pockets. “Travelling light?” he says.

Nick raises his eyebrows.

“You’ve no pack.”

“Got everything in my coat,” says Nick. He turns back to the bay and watches the water. “Here, let’s have a story.”

Euan leans back, smiling at the giddy sensation. He says, “Part of the code, eh? Getting pished and telling stories.”

“Tell us what brings you here.” Nick’s breath fogs the window. The light drifts through in cloudy wraiths.

Euan is quiet. The memory surfaces again.

Nick rubs his woollen cap and says, “Eh, no worries.” He clears his throat, then walks over to the metal box in the corner, taking out a pack of biscuits. He opens them and eats like a starving man. He punctuates with a mighty burp, then walks to the windowsill, and takes out a piece of bone from his pocket. It is whittled into the shape of a small dragon. He places it on the windowsill and meets Euan’s eye.

Euan does not know what to make of the man, but there is a sense of knowing between them. A complicity. He likes him. For a while, they talk in the way men do, at the edge of the world; time’s eye strays from them and words become weightless. Above the bay, the stars fall into place like cast runes. The men laugh and drink, until Nick says, “Now, how about that story?”

Euan considers, then sighs and leans forward across the table, facing Nick. “I’ll tell it, if you want to know.”

“I do.”

“Well I’ll trade you. You tell yours after.”

“I will.”

Euan nods. “Okay then.”

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She was waiting to be picked up after school. She had stayed late for art club. I remember she told me the teacher kept making them paint apples, but she was bored of that, so she painted giraffes instead. She wouldn’t stop going on about giraffes. She wanted one as a pet. She was funny, my sister.

It was winter, and she was wrapped up in her green down jacket. Her hair would pool in the hood. By the time Dad remembered he needed to pick her up, it was dark. The streetlamps were on... I keep asking myself why he forgot. Maybe it was the change of schedule; her staying late for art club? He was a single dad, so he always seemed stretched. When he finally realised, it must have been around six, seven. It was only him in the house. I was out.

Dad got in the car and drove. On the road, he tried to phone the school, but no one answered. At a set of traffic lights, he checked if Natasha had sent him any texts. She hadn’t. He tried to phone her, but it went straight through to voicemail. She must have been out of battery. Why else wouldn’t she pick up?

He sped down the narrow road that led to the school, telling himself she’d be there waiting. Maybe a teacher was with her? The country lanes were winding and dark, but rarely used at that time. He went faster. A dread thickened in his throat. She would be waiting. He

pictured her, standing by the school gates, nose reddened by the cold, her straw-yellow hair turned grey by the dusk. She would be waiting.

He pulled up to the school gates. No one there. The gates were locked. The lights in the classrooms were all out. He got out the car and searched.

“Natasha!”

Nothing. Only the roosting of rooks and the echo of her name. He waited for three minutes. He got back in the car and phoned a friend whose child went to the same school, asked if they had seen Natasha leave with anyone else. They said no. They asked if everything was okay. He hung up on them.

He drove around the school, searching the darkness. Figures of lurching men formed from the branches of trees and the shadows under streetlamps. Warmth began to well in his cheeks, he felt tears in his eyes. Blinking, he drove back, scouring the roadside, window lowered, calling her name. How long had she waited for him? Had she been scared?

Recently, another child had gone missing in the area. A boy. He had not been from Natasha’s school, but everyone knew. They had found his gloves in the forest.

He decided he would drive home and grab a torch so that he could search the wood around the school; sometimes Natasha would get lost in thought and go wandering. He would call me and ask me to search with him. Driving on, he pulled out his phone. He came to a corner and slammed on the brakes, skidding on the fog-damp road. He drove his foot down on the accelerator and drove away, finding my number, tapping the dial button, bringing it to his ear. It rang.

My voice coming through. “Dad?”

His eyes rolled back to the road. Too late to do anything. On impact, he flew forward, hit his head on the wheel.

Blood misted the air around the car.

He blinked, and saw that green down jacket lying twisted on the road.

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Nick is quiet. He lays both hands down on the table. He speaks without looking up. “To lose a family member... Terrible thing.”

Euan sniffs and rubs his nose roughly with a sleeve.

“And in that way... God.”

“Almost funny.” Euan lies back on the bench beside the table.

“You told the story like you were there.”

Euan snorts.

Nick rubs his woollen cap. “So that’s why you’re walking?”

Euan crosses his legs and folds his hands behind his head. It's all the reply he gives.

Nick takes up the flask and drains it. He screws the top back on and places it delicately in the centre of the table. The tide fills their silence with its slow pulse.

"So," says Euan, "Why don't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

Euan sits up. "You come here alone, won't say where you're from, and you've no pack. What business you have out here?"

Nick's eyes drift up from the table and meet Euan's. He licks his lips, and then slowly smiles. His teeth are like those of an old comb. "We're bold when we're pished, eh?"

"Only fair. I told you my story."

"How will you know I'm not lying?"

"I'll know."

Nick scoffs. "Will you now?" He rises from the table and wanders around the room for a while. Eventually, he settles by the window, picks up the bone carving and holds it in the moonlight. In that moment, his face begins to drip with water, his clothes are sodden, barnacles rise up through his skin, and the scent of festering seaweed is thick.

Euan blinks, and Nick is back to normal. He wonders what was in the flask. He rubs the bridge of his nose and tries to calm his hammering heart.

The carving shimmers.

"You take something, you leave something behind," Nick says.

"Who... who are you?"

Nick tosses the carving and catches it in a heavy fist. "There's a code. Who knows when the rules were made? But they're there, and should be followed."

Euan stares at the man, the sting of seaweed still in his nose. His limbs feel heavy, his head light. Nick's eyes glitter like sunken coins. He speaks.

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What makes a person wander? Two reasons. The first is that they are searching for something. The second is that they found it already, and don't like the answer. My father called it the tread-song. Sometimes a man would pass through our village with that far-away look in his eye, and my father would say to me, "You see that one, he's lost in the tread-song." When I saw someone like that, I always thought how lonely they must be. But they weren't alone. They had their tread-song. I know that now.

It was a man like this that came to stay at my father's inn. He had with him a daughter. Georgie. They arrived one night, paid for a room, and when the morning came, the man was gone. We found Georgie, alone, weeping. My brother and I peered from behind our father's

back as he took up Georgie in his arms and held her until she quieted. We didn't know why her father left. We never knew. Our Pa told Georgie that it would all be okay. He would care for her. My brother and I said nothing, we only stared up at the sallow faced girl, amazed.

Years passed, and Georgie almost forgot about her father, lost to the tread-song. She grew tall, keen eyed and quick – she had to keep me and my brother at bay. He and I did what brothers do; we squabbled over her, showboating and fawning, scrapping in the dirt while she laughed. I'd always lose the fights and my brother would stand triumphant over me, and then sulk, when Georgie came to my side.

That was the pattern of our days until my brother grew tired. He moved away to the city and left me and Georgie alone. We cared for my father as he died, and grief brought us closer. It was natural, the way we fell together, like an answer to a question that had lain dormant in us all our lives.

We looked after the inn, as my father lay dying, and our roots drove deeper. My brother returned and stayed at the inn, while we arranged the funeral. After Dad was buried, he stayed a little longer, helping us with the business, telling tales about where he had been over the years. He was exciting to listen to; he made you want to run away with him.

No surprise Georgie fell for him. When I found them together, I felt every root I had planted in that earth torn up. Seeing them... I had a choice. Hurt my brother, or leave and seek the tread-song.

I set out, walking until every sinew in me howled. Then, I came to this place. To Camasunary Bay. I lay down on that thrust of rock, just out there. I let the salt-waves lap at my ankles and the seaweed tickle my toes. I fell asleep there, and when I woke, there was a man beside me.

He was an ordinary man. Older than I. A gruff way about him. I told him my story, and he told me his. He said he had come to the bay by boat, and that he was done with it now. He was ready to return home.

After a long time talking, he asked if I wanted his boat. He said it had served him well and would me too. He gestured down the bay and there it was, rocking slowly against the shore. An old barnacled thing, but stout. I took his offer. Sailed out that morning.

As I left the shore, I saw him walking, surefooted, out of the bay.

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Euan staggers to his feet.

“If you want it, it's yours,” says Nick. He gestures out to the thrust of rock.

Euan moves beside Nick. He looks through the window, out at the bay, and sees the boat. It juts from the thrust like an old stone.

“...Where would I go?”

“Where it takes you.”

Euan turns to face Nick. The old man's breath is cold, like wind through a sea-cave. Euan feels it on his cheek. He shivers. Nick is gazing at him, eyes narrowed, as if he were following a skimmed stone. A moment of quiet.

"I would not have judged you, had you told the truth," says Nick.

Euan feels something rise in him like the need to cough. There is heat behind his eyes. He blinks back tears. "What do you mean?"

Nick steps closer, puts a hand on Euan's shoulder.

The sea stills, the light fades, and there is only the memory of his sister's broken body through the shattered windscreen. His hands still on the wheel, shaking.

Euan finds himself in the arms of Nick. He weeps into the man's shoulder, smells the sea.

Nick says nothing. There is nothing to be said.

By now, the stars are fading, being gathered up one by one, to be cast again. There is a moonlight road stretching from the horizon to the shore. It is singing.

A silent agreement is made. Nick takes up Euan's pack, shoulders it and walks to the door.

Euan puts on his coat, and follows Nick out, bracing himself against the cold. They share a look, then part.

Euan walks along the thrust, to the boat. He closes his eyes, and listens to the song.