



An extract from *And the Land Lays Still* by James Robertson

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And The Land Lays Still

by

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Mike is at the bedroom window, taking in the view of the water, the road and the scattering of cottages along it, when he sees Murdo's red van come round the end of the kyle. The van disappears for a few seconds, then begins to climb the hill. It slows, and pulls in at the gate. After a minute, as if he's been plucking up courage or maybe just thinking something over, Murdo gets out and starts up the track. By the time he arrives at the back door Mike is there waiting for him. With a shy, almost sly grin Murdo proffers a plastic bag. Mike unwraps the newspaper bundle it contains and there are two rainbow trout shining in the morning sun.

'They're beautiful,' Mike says.

'Fresh from the loch last night,' Murdo says. 'Can you make use of them?'

'Of course. I'll cook them tonight. Will you come for your tea?'

'Och, they'll just do yourself nicely.'

'Nonsense. There's one each.'

'They're not that big.'

'They're fine. I'll make plenty of tatties. Will you come?'

'I might at that. I have a few things to do first.'

'Well, it's only ten o'clock. You have all day. But come any time you like. I'm not going anywhere.'

'I will then.'

The necessary negotiations over, they stand enjoying the sun, of which there has not been too much lately. Mike says, 'Do you have a moment just now?'

Murdo looks down at the van and shrugs. 'There's nothing that won't keep.'

'I want to show you something.'

'Aye, do you?'

Inside, Mike puts the fish in the kitchen sink. They go into the hallway, past the front door that's never used, through the sitting

room and into the sun lounge that Murdo's uncle built at the side of the house thirty-five years ago for Mike's father.

'I was at my father's archive again yesterday,' Mike says, 'trying to impose a bit more order on it. And going through the photographs for this exhibition, yet again.'

'The one in . . . Edinburgh?' Murdo makes it sound not just two hundred and fifty miles away but as if it's on another continent.

'Yes. I keep thinking I've made the final selection, and then I find I haven't.'

'And there's to be a book as well?'

'To go with the exhibition, yes. I'm trying to write the introduction, but it's not going too well. Anyway, I was sorting through some boxes and I came across this photograph.'

He hands over the print. Murdo holds it by the edges with his calloused fingers and looks at it thoughtfully, as he might at a diagram of how to assemble a new tool.

'I'd never seen it before last night,' Mike says, 'but as soon as I did I remembered everything about it. You're looking at probably the only photograph in existence of the three of us together. My father, my mother and myself, I mean. Maybe my mother has some others secreted away, but I doubt it.'

'It's your father right enough,' Murdo says. 'A good-looking man. And is that your mother? She's a bonnie woman. She doesn't look very pleased though.'

'She wasn't very pleased,' Mike says, thinking that being pleased hasn't ever been one of Isobel's strong points, not that he can remember. 'That was the first time I was ever in these parts. July, 1964. We were on holiday. That's Dounreay, of course, in the background.'

'Aye. Awful-looking place, isn't it?'

'At the time we didn't think so. It seemed clean and bright and modern.'

'I never liked it, right from the start. They only put it there in case it blew up. Who'd care if it blew up there? It employed a lot of people over the years, I suppose, but what are they all meant to do now?' He reins himself in. 'But you surely didn't spend your holiday at Dounreay?'

'No, it was just a stop on the way. We had a week and we drove

over to the west, then round the north coast, down to Inverness and home again.'

'That's a fair distance in a week.'

'It certainly was then. There were no bridges. It was all ferries and some of them only took a couple of cars at a time.'

'There wouldn't have been so many cars though.'

'No, not many. Anyway, I just wanted to show you. My family, such as it was. My father moved out later that year and they got divorced not long after that.'

'And this is yourself. How old are you?'

'I was nine.'

'You have very thin legs,' Murdo says. 'In the picture, I mean.'

'I look a bit delicate, don't I?'

'If you'd lived here we'd have toughened you up.'

'Oh?'

'We'd have been at the school together. I'd have beaten you up regularly.'

'There's three years between us. You wouldn't even have noticed me.'

'Believe me, boy, there was no way you could not be noticed. Everybody noticed everything about everybody.'

'And do they still?'

'Not so much. You incomers guard your privacy well. But people around here have always been pretty discreet, you know, whatever they notice.'

He hands back the photograph, and they go outside again, round to the front of the house, and there they pause before Murdo takes his leave, standing beside the rowan tree Mike planted for his father. Angus's rowan. It is naked but looking resilient. It's too early yet for there to be new growth.

'I wonder how long this will last,' Mike says, meaning the weather.

'Ach, just until it's over.'

The air is cold, but there's hardly a cloud in the sky and the sunlight is catching every ripple in the water. Maybe Mike will go out for an hour with the camera after all. On the other hand, he has to get on with preparing for the exhibition and the book.

'I'll see you tonight then?'

‘Aye, I’ll look forward to it,’ Murdo says, without a trace of anticipation in his tone. Mike is still not quite sure when Murdo is having a gentle joke at his expense.

‘We’ll have a dram or two after we’ve eaten.’

‘If you insist. Before, too, if you insist. Will you leave the gate open?’

‘I will.’

So Murdo can drive straight in and park at the back of the house. Mike puts out a hand and touches him lightly on the shoulder, and Murdo gives him a look that barely acknowledges the contact, as if it were accidental. But it is anything but that.

§

There is something else unique about the photograph. It is, almost certainly, the only image in the entire Angus Pendreich archive not actually taken by Angus Pendreich.

It shows the Pendreichs – Angus, Isobel and Michael – picnicking in the lee of what was then the future. That was how it felt and how Angus talked about it. He’d brought them there for that very purpose, to demonstrate his faith in better things to come. On that patch of thin grass above the beach they could be witnesses to a new era. Thirty yards one way the blue-black sea filled the view as it always had done; in the other direction cows grazed green fields bounded by stone slabs embedded in the earth; beyond these was another strip of water, and then the giant golf ball of the Dounreay atomic power plant. The future. The triumph of science. The harnessing of unimaginable might for the eternal benefit of mankind. Electricity so cheap you wouldn’t be able to meter it. Angus wanted to believe all that and he wanted Isobel and Michael – it was always Michael then – to believe it with him. It should have been exciting and heartening, on the second-last day of a trip where almost everything had been new, at least in the sense that Michael had not previously experienced it: the wee car ferries, the twisting narrow roads with passing places, palm trees nurtured by the Gulf Stream. Further west they’d found hairy cows sunbathing on beaches next to children chattering away in Gaelic, but now this was Caithness and the weather had turned cloudy and cold, and, regardless of whatever bounty the future might hold for mankind, as a family unit the Pendreichs were heading for destruction.

A nuclear family indeed, was Mike's first thought when he came across the picture. But where did we think we were going to store our poisonous waste? They didn't, of course, think about it at all. The future wasn't going to be about waste.

The only other pictures Mike has of Angus are ones he took himself, and none of these are from before 1970, the year he got his first real camera and made up his mind to be a photographer, like his father. Since Angus was always the one behind the camera, he was always absent from the image. Here he is, though, just as Mike remembers him from that summer holiday – tall, handsome, with thick, dishevelled dark hair and a caddish smile, standing defiantly against the world and the weather. He's wearing light-coloured, summery trousers and an open-necked, short-sleeved shirt, and he seems to find the wind bracing. His wife and son, on the other hand, crouched on a tartan rug on the grass in front of him, are obviously feeling frozen. The photograph is black and white – of course, since Angus never used colour film in his life – but somehow he looks ruddy and healthy, whereas Isobel and Michael are as grey as the sky. Isobel is in a stylish raincoat with the collar turned up, while Michael sports an unstylish green anorak with a fake-fur-lined hood, although as a concession to the moment he has pushed the hood back from his face. Also, he is wearing shorts. And sandals. Mike knows it's himself – it looks like him, the way he was – but it doesn't feel like him. There's a basket on the rug beside Isobel, elements of a picnic scattered around it. All three of them are raising plastic mugs to the photographer, in a kind of grim toast to holiday fun.

The photographer? A man who happened to be walking along the road at the time. Angus had already taken a couple of shots of his wife and child, and then the man came by. There was the road, then a rough bit of ground where the car was parked, then the grass, the beach and the sea. Angus called out to the man, would he mind taking their picture? He seemed not to hear at first, maybe it was the wind, but Angus bounded over and asked again. If the man said anything back Michael didn't catch it. He was whip-thin and yet somehow bulky, very upright, and he had a khaki pack slung over his shoulder. The face was brown and hard-looking. A scrape of beard on the cheeks, that was all. He was wearing a beret so you couldn't see the colour of his hair or indeed if he had any, but Michael thought

that he looked quite old, and then that perhaps he wasn't much older than his father. The man listened patiently while Angus showed him how to work the camera. All he had to do was look through the viewfinder and press the button. But he did this before Angus was in position, and then it seemed he might have pressed something else by accident and Angus had to go back and check it and then return, and all the time Isobel and Michael were holding their pose in the cold, Isobel with her legs folded beneath her, one hand clutching her mug and the other holding her hair off her face, and Michael on his hunkers a couple of feet away, feeling the pins and needles in the backs of his knees, and he heard Isobel say through clenched teeth, 'For God's sake,' and somehow knew from the way she said it that it was over between his parents and that whatever this photograph was recording it wasn't family happiness, and he wondered why on earth his father was going to all the trouble.

For posterity, perhaps, is what he thinks now. Maybe Angus already knew he would shortly be leaving them.

Mike studies his nine-year-old self. The white, hairless legs, poking out beneath the anorak and shorts, do seem pathetically fragile. He studies his mother. She's thirty-one, still a beautiful young woman if only she'd smile a bit. But Isobel was never going to smile for this photograph, just as the stranger holding the camera – Michael knew this instinctively – was not a man who was ever going to say, 'Say "Cheese!"' And then it was done, and Angus thanked him and took the camera back, and that should have been the end of it, but it wasn't.

The man lingered, as if he expected something more than Angus's thanks. A tip, perhaps? Michael sensed his mother's rage simmering again. But it was the man who put his hand in his own pocket and drew something out. He stepped towards Michael with his clenched fist extended, and the boy automatically stood up and went towards him. 'Michael,' Isobel said, but whatever the mystery was in that fist he wanted it. He held out his hand and the man dropped something in and with a quick, fierce movement closed Michael's fingers over it. The man's hand was rough and dry. Michael glanced up at him. His stare was intense and distant, as if he were looking both at and right through him, and then he let go and walked away without a word. He was separate again, he seemed separate from everything, a lonely figure hunched into the wind, and then he stopped and

turned and stared at Michael again, and Angus must have seen the potential of *that* picture, the man in the road staring like a prophet, the cows, the light bouncing between the clouds and the sea, the looming Dounreay dome, and he took it. The decisive moment, Cartier-Bresson called it. And what a great photograph it is.

When Mike first came upon it, he immediately decided that it would have to be a late addition to the exhibition. But it's the other one, the not very good one of the family, that he keeps going back to. As if somewhere in it there is a clue, advance notice of how everything was going to be. That was why he wanted to show it to Murdo: to say, look, this is where I come from, do you think that wee boy ever imagined life turning out like this?

When the man was twenty yards down the road Michael opened his hand, and there in the palm was a pebble. That was all. A small, smooth, disappointing pebble about the size of a broad bean. It could have come from a beach or a field or a garden path – anywhere. Isobel demanded to know what it was, and Michael showed her and she told him to throw it away. But he would not, and when she failed to appeal to his father for support Michael slipped it into his pocket, where he kept it for days, feeling its inconsequential smoothness with his fingers and thinking about the man. Eventually he lost it. It was nothing, but the man had given it to him, and even now when he thinks of the pebble he remembers the intensity of the man's stare.

They carried on with their picnic. In the basket was a Thermos flask of Heinz tomato soup, heated up by their landlady of the previous night, and a bread-wrapper full of cheese-and-ham sandwiches she'd also made for them. They drank the soup, dredged their way through the sandwiches. The wind gusting in off the sea made sitting still an endurance. Isobel and Michael stayed on the tartan rug only because it held a suggestion of warmth. He didn't want to be too close to her because of the mood she was in but he felt a kind of loyalty to her because he suspected that Angus was a bad husband. He wasn't that great a father either. He spent too much time away, working, or – as Mike now knows – not working. Even at nine years old he had a dim understanding that he was the only reason, if it was a reason, that his parents were still together. And so he felt a childish responsibility towards his mother and her misery, because his father was showing none.

Angus paced around like an eccentric lecturer, firing information at them between bites and swallows. He was trying to explain how a fast reactor worked: how it produced more fuel than it consumed, converting uranium into plutonium, so in effect could go on making electricity for ever. There wasn't much uranium in the world but the fast-breeder process meant once you had enough to start a chain reaction you were away. Energy in perpetuity. He wanted to convince them of the significance of where they were, how their lives were linked to the power of the atom. But he was wasting his breath, because Isobel and Michael were hardly listening, they were eating and drinking as fast as they could so they could pack up and move on, so he could take them to John o'Groats, where they'd get out and do whatever you were supposed to do at one end of the British Isles and after that drive on to the God-awful hotel or bed and breakfast he'd earmarked for them for the night, where hopefully there'd be a hot bath and maybe even a fire. That was all. They didn't care a dicken about nuclear fission, and he probably didn't understand half of what he was trying to explain. They were all out of their respective depths. And so they packed up the picnic things and drove away from the wondrous white-domed building perched on the edge of Scotland, and as they were going Isobel said, 'That man was a tramp.'

'What man?' Angus said.

'The man who took the picture.'

'No!' Angus said, dismissive but quite jovial at first. 'Surely not? Tramps have long straggly beards and ten overcoats. And they smell. He didn't smell too bad.'

She sighed at his childishness. 'There was something about him.'

'What?' Michael could tell her sigh irritated his father. There was a tone to it, and a tone to his short response. Two noises full of impatience and disrespect.

'I didn't like him. Giving that stupid stone to Michael.'

'Och, well, that's him then, condemned and transported if *you* don't like him. Bloody vagrant, handing out stones to kids. Anyway, what if he was a tramp?' He scowled in the mirror. 'Michael, do you think he was a tramp?'

Michael said, 'His clothes weren't that dirty, but they were old-looking.'

'You see?' Isobel said.

‘His face looked like it was made of leather,’ Michael said. ‘Like he spent a lot of time out of doors. And I think he had quite a lot of clothes on, but he was very thin.’

‘You see?’ Isobel said again, so that Michael, who hated being on her side, had to add, ‘But I don’t think he was a tramp.’

‘Well, what was he then?’ Isobel snapped.

‘I don’t know. Maybe he was mad.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Isobel said. The idea of insanity scared her more than vagrancy.

‘Tramps don’t go around handing out stones,’ Angus said. ‘But I don’t give a damn who or what he is. I asked him to do me a favour and he was kind enough to oblige.’

‘You’re lucky he didn’t drop your camera,’ Isobel said. ‘Or steal it.’

Angus muttered something Michael couldn’t hear.

‘If we pass him, *don’t* offer him a lift.’

‘I might just do that,’ Angus said. ‘One good turn deserves another.’

‘If he gets into this car, I’m getting out.’

Michael prayed fervently for them to pass the man, just to see what happened, but they didn’t. A heavy, hateful emptiness gathered under the roof of the car. Michael slumped back, pulling the anorak hood up over his head, preferring the seashell effect of the fake fur against his ears to the dead silence that he was learning to recognise as the soundtrack of a marriage beyond repair. And in his pocket he felt for the pebble and wondered why the man had given it to him, and what it might mean.

Looking at the photograph brings it all back. It’s like a still from a film of other people’s lives. Michael and Mum and Dad. And they became Mike and Isobel and Angus. Shifting, uncertain identities. When he thinks about those shared lives, about human existence in general, he finds there is not much to put faith in. But this he knows for sure: our ability to look back on the past, our need or desire to make sense of it, is both a blessing and a curse; and our inability to see into the future with any degree of accuracy is, simultaneously, the thing that saves us and the thing that condemns us.

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Holiday over, they got home to Doune, their Perthshire village, and the next morning Angus took Michael into Stirling and bought him

the new Beatles single, 'A Hard Day's Night', six shillings and eightpence from Hay's Music Shop, and when they came back Michael went into the sitting room and played it on the gramophone, first the A side then the B side, 'Things We Said Today', and wondered what he would do, apart from that, for the rest of the holidays. And then Angus came in and waited till the record finished for the sixth time and said he quite liked it and how would you fancy a couple of weeks' extra holiday? Because your mother and I have been talking things over and we think it would be better if you don't go to the local school any more but go away to a boarding school, they have the English holidays so you wouldn't start there till September. So where is this school, in England? No, it's not far up the road, near Aberfeldy. So why do they have English holidays? They just do, it's a different system, you'll get longer holidays at Christmas and Easter too. And if it's at Aberfeldy would I have to stay there? Yes, you'd board, it's a boarding school, it's too far to drive there every day. But you said it wasn't far up the road. Well, it's not, but that's not what I meant. Anyway, these schools, you get the most out of these schools if you board. But why can't I just stay where I am? Because I'm away so much. What's that got to do with it? Well, it would be helpful to your mother. Your mother thinks – we both think – you'll get a better education at this other school, and from there you can go on to another boarding school, it's a great opportunity, it's not cheap but we can manage it.

They talked about it some more but Angus had already sold the idea with the bit about longer holidays. Also, there were two other boys who lived in a bigger house in the village who went away to school, and Michael had always kind of envied them although he didn't know them, he only knew *of* them, and maybe that was why he envied them, they were remote, almost anonymous. That was one of the things that would happen if he went away, he would become anonymous. He'd be distinct from the other kids in the village, and this appealed to him because he suspected that in some deep way he already was. And then Isobel came in and reinforced everything Angus had said, which was strange because they so seldom backed each other up. Michael was only nine so he didn't fully see that they were conspiring against him; that Isobel, being a snob, had always wanted him to have a private education, and Angus, who

was vaguely opposed to it in principle, was willing to concede the principle because that would offer a solution to his own problems. For Michael was indeed the reason why he was still with Isobel and if that reason were removed then he could go off and have the life he wanted with the women he wanted to be with. Michael didn't understand all this, not then, but he knew his father was in some way at fault. He still loved and admired him, though. He still thought he wanted to be like him.

So that afternoon they drove the forty miles to the school near Aberfeldy, an establishment called Bellcroft House, where it turned out an appointment had been made to see the headmaster before they'd even gone on holiday. The headmaster had doubtless seen it all before, middle-class people looking for a safe place to dump their inconvenient offspring, and treated Michael with a rough kindness that was intended not only to put him at ease but also to allay any parental fears or suspicions. They were given a tour of the empty buildings, and Michael was given an inquisition, because it seemed *he* was on trial not the school, even though Angus was going to be forking out hundreds of pounds to send him there. But to no one's great surprise he was acceptable and therefore accepted, and the three Pendreichs came away smiling, all for their different reasons. And in September, kitted out with a new school uniform, Michael entered a new phase of his life.

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And now Dounreay is being decommissioned at a cost of God knows how many millions, possibly billions, of pounds, and they still haven't worked out what to do with the waste: the stuff, that is, they can account for, the stuff they haven't chucked down shafts or allowed to piss out into the Pentland Firth and wash up on the beaches in tiny ticking wee cancer-bombs. No doubt there's more they've not told anyone about, because one thing Mike believes about governments and government agencies is that they won't tell you anything bad if they can possibly avoid doing so. Even an outright denial – for example, that depleted uranium shells have ever been used on the Cape Wrath firing range – only inclines him to believe the opposite. Perhaps, however, that says more about him than about the Ministry of Defence.

From the bedroom window he looks out on the Atlantic every morning, sixty miles from Dounreay, and there is something ironic about the fact that he's chosen to be here for the tranquillity, to inherit the peace and quiet that Angus found when he bought the place, when for half a century the whole area's been used as a kind of open laboratory and he suspects he's looking out not on wild, unspoiled beauty but on a silent, pernicious sickness. And yet it doesn't make him afraid or want to leave, it just makes him want to record it, endlessly: the ocean, the land, the light, the weather. There's no doubt in his mind: there, in his father's house, sorting out Angus's work and engaging in his own, is where he wants to be.

§

They've eaten the trout, and the dishes are piled in the sink and Mike will do them later, after Murdo has gone. They're in the sun lounge with an electric fire on, whiskies in their hands, looking out at the dark sea loch and the shoulders of the hills, and clouds building around the moon. They are reminiscing – or, rather, Mike is – about 1964: the year he went away to school, the Forth Road Bridge opened, and he saw *Mary Poppins* with his mother and *Goldfinger* with his father.

'I managed to miss *Mary Poppins*,' Murdo says, 'I am pleased to report.'

'*Goldfinger* was great,' Mike says. 'My dad took me to see it on my first half-term break. He fetched me from school but instead of going straight home we went to the pictures in Perth. I think he just wanted to stay out of the house because he and my mother were fighting about everything by that stage. Politics included. There'd been a General Election the day before and when we finally got home that was what they fought about. Mum in the blue corner, Dad in the red. Labour had won the election but only by four seats. My mother took it personally because the outgoing Tory Prime Minister was our own MP, Sir Alec Douglas-Home.'

'You are a font of knowledge,' Murdo says. 'Or should that be a mine of information? I couldn't have told you about the four seats, but I'm guessing the Labour leader was Harold Wilson?'

'It was.'

‘Now there was a slippery customer.’

‘Aye, but my dad kept saying how wonderful he was, just to infuriate my mum. He wasn’t a very profound socialist – my dad, I mean – he’d just enrolled me at a prep school, after all – but he believed in the Welfare State and the general idea of redistributing other people’s wealth. And he despised Sir Alec Douglas-Home, whom my mother admired. But something else happened at that election: right there, in our very own constituency, Hugh MacDiarmid stood for the Communist Party.’

‘The wild-haired poet,’ Murdo says.

‘Yes. It was sheer provocation. He made inflammatory speeches against capitalism and rude remarks about the person of the Prime Minister, and although –’

‘Rude remarks?’

‘He said he was a zombie.’

‘Good.’

‘And a yes-man of the Pentagon –’

‘Very good.’

‘– and although MacDiarmid didn’t have an earthly chance of winning, neither did the Labour candidate, so my dad, who’d met MacDiarmid in Edinburgh and taken pictures of him, not only decided to vote for him but went around telling everybody that’s what he was going to do. My mother was horrified.’

‘I imagine it didn’t do much for her social standing,’ Murdo says.

‘Not a thing. MacDiarmid came bottom of the poll with a hundred and twenty-seven votes,’ Mike says, ‘and apparently demanded a recount because he said there couldn’t possibly be that many good socialists in Kinross and West Perthshire. My dad spent the weekend telling this story to anyone we met, the man in the paper shop, the neighbours, anyone. “I was one of them!” he said. Shouted, in fact. It was quite embarrassing, even for me. I think if my mother could have cited political incompatibility as grounds for divorce, she’d have done so. But she didn’t have to, because by then he was having an affair with a woman in the BBC in Glasgow and was about to move out. I knew something was afoot, because he spent part of that weekend packing things into boxes in the garage. And when he took me back to school on the Monday the car was laden with his stuff, whereas I just had my toothbrush. He must have gone

straight back to Glasgow. I don't think he ever slept another night in our house.'

'It must have been upsetting for you,' Murdo says. 'Divorce wasn't exactly common in those days. Even in the fleshpots of Doune, I would guess. It was practically unheard of here.'

'No, I don't remember being that upset. I just got on with it. But that was the first Christmas I had without my father.'

'Christmas was practically unheard of here too,' Murdo says.

§

On the journey back to Aberfeldy, Angus asked Michael if he was happy at Bellcroft House. Mike still believes that if he had said that he was miserable, that he was being bullied, that he hated it with all his heart, Angus would have done something about it. But he didn't tell him any of those things, because they weren't true. He'd adjusted without any great difficulty to his new situation. A place away from the parental fighting had something to recommend it. In just a few weeks he'd made it his own. He'd lost touch with the children he'd grown up with and transferred his affections, such as they were, to a couple of the Bellcroft masters, the brusque but motherly matron, and a boy in his year called Freddy Eddelstane.

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Mike's father was left-leaning politically, at least partly because of his experience during the war. He'd joined up at eighteen and at twenty was doing his bit in the invasion of Europe. The comics Michael read as a boy, which poured in vast quantities from the presses of D. C. Thomson in Dundee, were stuffed with Second World War adventures, and he liked to imagine his dad in one of them, revolver in one hand and a camera round his neck, leading his troops on to a Normandy beach under enemy fire. The reality was less heroic. Angus was a second lieutenant who hardly ever got near the front line, and whose war consisted mainly of organising convoys and fuel supplies. The twenty or thirty photos that survive from his war years are small, creased snaps of groups of men in front of lorries, and some hazy images of ruined Berlin. No sign of the unorthodox 'Angus angle' that would later make his name. Once Michael asked him if he'd killed anybody. No, Angus said, there

were plenty of other people doing that. Michael must have looked disappointed. Angus said, 'I saw people who'd *been* killed.' 'Germans?' 'Yes. And French and British and Americans. And you know what, they all looked pretty much the same when they were dead.' Then he went on to speak of the camaraderie of the army, the way the younger, non-regular officers like himself would mix with their men, exchanging jokes and ideas and opinions, and how he shared the general view that when it was over and they went home things were going to change. 'We were all for Labour. It was our war, and it was going to be our peace. Some of the senior officers hated us. Thought we were fraternising with the enemy, politically speaking. But there wasn't much they could do about it.'

Apart from a commitment to Labour, Angus brought something else back from the war – a Leica IIIc, a hefty camera of impeccable German design, bought for next to nothing in occupied Berlin. It was the camera with which he made his name, and he used it for twenty years until the mid-1960s when he replaced it with a Nikon F, a virtually indestructible beast much favoured by photographers in war zones. Both cameras still sit in their hard, burnished-leather cases on a shelf in the sitting room at Cnoc nan Gobhar. They are antiques now, or soon will be; as redundant as darkrooms or Kodachrome film. But Mike keeps them, because of their intrinsic beauty, and because – who knows? – one day they may come into their own again.

§

There were eighty boys at Bellcroft House, aged between seven and thirteen, doing time in deepest Perthshire because their fathers had before them, or because – as in Michael's case – one or both parents believed such an incarceration a necessary prelude to a successful social and professional career, or because the parents were overseas with the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank or the British Council or the Foreign Office, or because they hadn't managed to secure a place for their offspring in one of a dozen better prep schools, outposts of an alien education system, dotted about the Scottish countryside. Of those eighty boys, some were bright and others stupid, some fat and others tall, some athletic and others athletically incompetent, some musical and others growlers, and all of them were

white. Perhaps because neither of them quite ‘fitted’ with the crowd, Freddy Eddelstane and Michael began to go about together. If they were not close friends, they were at least mutually tolerant companions.

Back from that half-term break, Michael told Freddy about the election battle – the one between his parents – and how it had come about. Freddy had actually met Sir Alec Douglas-Home, because his father was a Tory MP too, or had been until the election, in the next-door constituency of Glenallan and Somewhere Else, Freddy forgot where. Had he been beaten? Michael wanted to know. It seemed to him that if your father went around in public asking people to vote for him, the overwhelming likelihood was that they wouldn’t, and he would lose. ‘Of course he wasn’t beaten,’ Freddy said, ‘he retired.’ ‘Is he very old then?’ ‘I don’t know,’ said Freddy. ‘I suppose he is, he’s fifty-something. How old is yours?’ ‘Forty.’ ‘That’s not so young.’ ‘It’s younger than fifty.’ But even though fifty was a great age, Michael knew people didn’t retire until they were in their sixties, practically dead. ‘But what’ll he do?’ Fathers earned money. Freddy and his family might starve. Freddy was not in the least concerned. ‘There’s always something,’ he said.

Gradually, by such exchanges, they learned about each other: how both sets of parents fought incessantly but only Michael’s were splitting up; that Michael was an only child whereas Freddy had an older brother called David and an older sister called Lucy. What was it like, having a sister? Terrible, because she was insane. Freddy’s brother was weird and his sister was insane. In fact, Freddy said with pride, his whole family was insane: his father was barking, his mother was bonkers, and even the gardener was a bad-tempered old lunatic. The gardener! If Michael hadn’t been laughing so much already he would have been astonished at the idea of a gardener. Freddy could make him laugh very easily. He had a plummy voice, the face of an ugly old man, and a clumsy, carefree attitude to life, and almost everything he said seemed funny to Michael. In his Sunday letters home, which for the rest of that term began ‘Dear Mum and Dad’ because his mother didn’t tell him till Christmas that his father was no longer there, Michael wrote about how Eddelstane and he had done this or that, and that Eddelstane told good jokes and said Michael could go and stay with him in the holidays.

Isobel, having worked out that this Eddelstane was the son of Sir Malcolm and Lady Patricia Eddelstane of Ochiltree House, Glenallan, would have been delighted if this had happened, but it never did, because Freddy never got around to organising it. It meant nothing to him, throwing out such an invitation, except that he liked Michael well enough to say it.

The teachers at Bellcroft were a collection of unworldly oddities, most of whom looked as if they had awoken from one strange dream only to find themselves in another. Michael felt he had something in common with them, from the impossibly shy, tongue-tied Mr Veitch, who taught Geography and, after a fashion, Science, to the French master, Monsieur Lucas. M. Lucas was a dishevelled, shambling, straggle-haired man of uncertain vintage, with a tendency to conclude his sentences with a shout. He and his wife lived in Aberfeldy with their three sons, who attended the local school. He was Belgian, or half-Belgian, and proud of it. 'Je suis belge, Monsieur Michel,' he said, 'et je ne l'oublie *jamaï*.' He called all the boys 'monsieur', except when he called them 'mon ami', which was equally pleasing. There was an air of mystery about him, enhanced both by his penchant for recounting tales of the supernatural and the fact that he had a life outwith the bounds and hours of the school. He often arrived looking as if he hadn't gone to bed the previous night, or had slept in the clothes he was wearing if he had. Maybe he was a poacher? Maybe he had been in the Resistance during the war? 'Peut-être,' he said, when the boys asked him. 'I resist *everything*.' He corrected their vocabulary tests with flamboyant ticks, crosses and exclamation marks, and read their feeble efforts at composition with his nose an inch from the jotter, being severely short-sighted although he resisted wearing *les lunettes*. They loved it when he bellowed at their stupidity, for, loud though he barked, his bite was non-existent, and he was easily distracted from the task in hand by a well-timed question about the war, or ghosts – or politics. For M. Lucas was so unbalanced as to be a member of the Scottish National Party, and went to political meetings and conferences and rallies, and wrote letters to the papers on the subject of independence for small nations, and saw it as his duty to tell his pupils stories of Wallace and Bruce and the Black Douglas so that they would have a true understanding of the history of their country. Once,

when Winnie Ewing won her famous victory at the Hamilton by-election in 1967, he was so carried away that the entire lesson was given over to an analysis of the campaign and its implications. But another time, during a particularly long, loud and gory session on William Wallace, the headmaster opened the door suddenly and asked if he could speak with M. Lucas for a moment, outside, and when M. Lucas came back he was glum and roarless, and for a fortnight thereafter would not be diverted. But then he forgot, or remembered that he resisted *everything*, and life returned to abnormal. All this endeared M. Lucas greatly to Michael.

But if schools like Bellcroft House were outposts of an alien system, sometimes infiltrated by men like M. Lucas, then the places you went on to from them were veritable fortresses of the occupation. And this network of garrisons had its own complex pecking order. If you went to a certain prep school – one, say, in the vicinity of Edinburgh – then you would probably go on to one of three or four ‘public schools’ in or around the capital. If you were at a certain ‘public school’ then you had probably come from one of half a dozen prep schools which supplied that school with its annual intake. In this pecking order Bellcroft House came close to the bottom. It was one of the reasons why Angus Pendreich could afford it. It did not, generally speaking, turn out high-academic performers and even when it did there was no guarantee of admission to one of the ‘top’ schools. There existed, however, a ready-made receptacle for the products of Bellcroft House: located a dozen miles deeper into the wilds of Perthshire, it was called Kilsmeddum Castle. At Bellcroft, the underlying ethos was benign. Kilsmeddum was a crumbling, damp, cultureless hellhole infested with mice, where greed, selfishness, snobbery and bullying were the order of the day. The Oxbridge third-raters who posed as teachers, far from feeling thankful for having found sanctuary from the world, as Mr Veitch did at Bellcroft, resented being there and took their resentment out on their charges. In every respect, Kilsmeddum Castle was the last place a loving parent would deposit a loved child.

Within a few days of arriving there Michael detested the place and never wavered from this antipathy. He put up with it because by then there seemed little point in objecting – and because Angus did, albeit sporadically, come to rescue him.

Freddy Eddelstane was there too, as his brother had been. Michael didn't get this. Why, with their background, weren't they sent to a more prestigious school, possibly one south of the Border? Freddy said his father was a cheapskate, but even if he weren't it wouldn't make any difference. 'We've got loads of house,' he said, 'rooms and rooms and rooms of it, but no money.' But, Michael wondered, what did 'no money' mean when your father was a 'Sir'?

They stayed friends, kind of, but more and more Michael learned to rely on his own resources, distancing himself from the crass obscenities and boorishness of the mob. Whatever it was he wanted, he knew it wasn't that. Some of the mob grew suspicious and cornered him. 'Are you a poof, Pendreich?' He realised that how he responded would determine how, or whether, he continued to survive. For the first and only time in his life he punched someone in the face. A bright red stream spurted from the boy's nose and he started to cry. Michael was as surprised as any of them at what he had done but managed to conceal it. They left him alone.

Later, Freddy caught up with him. All the slight exaggeration of features that had made the child Freddy ugly had burst forth at adolescence into loose-fleshed, ogre-like coarseness. He was a kind of human toad. As such he was regularly set upon by the mob, but had learned to deflect the aggression by becoming a self-mocking court jester to the ringleaders. So he had to be careful about displaying any loyalty to Michael.

'I heard what happened,' he said. 'Are you all right?'

'Nothing happened.'

'Yes it did.'

They were in a corridor, with other boys coming and going. Freddy dragged him to the changing rooms, where they were alone among the rows of pegs, each loaded with its boy-shaped, sweat-and-mud-streaked collection of tracksuits and rugby shirts. The place was rank with boy smell.

'Are you all right?' he asked again.

'I'm fine.'

'What happened?'

Freddy was impressed by Michael's hitherto unrevealed capacity for violence, but what interested him more was the psychological element of the confrontation.

‘Well, are you a poof?’

‘What?’

‘Something made you hit him.’

‘Well, I’m not a poof. Are you?’ Michael really didn’t want to have to punch Freddy too.

‘No.’

‘Fine. That’s that settled then.’

Michael wanted to get away, and started walking towards the door. Suddenly Freddy said, ‘But I think my brother is.’

This was astonishing news. It seemed to reveal to Michael something not about Freddy’s brother, not even about Freddy, but about himself.

‘Really?’

‘Maybe.’

‘You always said he was weird, but weird’s not the same as queer, is it?’

‘No.’ He smiled, or scowled, it was hard to tell which because he was so ugly. ‘Maybe he’s just weird.’

The door opened and somebody came in, a prefect. ‘What are you two doing here?’

‘Nothing,’ Freddy said.

‘Well go and do it somewhere else.’

They went, and nothing more was said.

§

‘Did you make any progress with that introduction?’ Murdo asks.

‘I read over what I’d already written and then tinkered with it,’ Mike says. ‘Not at all productive.’

‘I wouldn’t know where to start,’ Murdo says. ‘I’ve not tried to write anything since I was at school.’

He picks at the window ledge beside his chair, and looks round at the rest of the sun lounge.

‘This place needs a coat of paint.’

‘I know. Outside and in.’

‘More than paint. You’ve let the woodwork go.’

‘Do you want to do it?’

‘I will if you want me to.’

‘I’ll pay you for it.’

‘Aye, you will. Used notes only.’

Murdo can turn his hand to just about anything. His cousin took over the uncle’s building business and Murdo sometimes works for him. He also does painting jobs and other repair and maintenance work for people who either can’t or don’t want to do it themselves. He services his own van and will do other people’s vehicles if they’re not too fussy about them. He does Mike’s car although he says it would be kinder to roll it over the edge of a cliff. His customers pay him in cash and if he doesn’t declare more to the taxman than what he earns from the cousin nobody is blaming him for it. God knows it’s hard enough making an income around here, they say, and one thing about Murdo, he’s no scrounger, you’ll not catch him sitting on his backside claiming benefit like some. Sometimes folk are short of money and they owe him it, or they pay him in kind – a lamb for the freezer, a fill of red diesel from the farm tank. ‘It’s how a real economy works,’ Murdo says. ‘Not that you’d expect economists to understand.’

‘How long would it take you?’ Michael asks.

‘Two days. Maybe three. It depends on the weather. Also on how much of the wood needs to be replaced.’

‘Well, I’m going to have to go to Edinburgh some time soon. To do with the exhibition. You could do it then.’

‘Aye.’

‘I’ll let you know when I’ve arranged the dates.’

‘I’m sure we’ll sort something out.’

They have run out of things to say. This is fine. They sit in companionable silence and the night grows around them. This is absolutely fine.

§

By morning the weather has changed back. It’s warmer, but the cloud is low on the hills and there’s a steady downpour. Mike has another look at the introduction, essay, memoir, whatever it is he’s trying to write. That’s the problem, he doesn’t know. But a deadline is looming: it’s March and he has until 1 May to deliver the final text. He should be writing about Angus – the photographer, the father – and has made several stabs at it but it just isn’t happening, he doesn’t seem to be touching him at all. Faced with the blank

computer screen and that deadline, and the memories provoked by those photographs at Dounreay, he is also confronted, and not for the first time, by the possibility that he didn't really know his father at all. He looks again at the family in the photograph: the tall man, the cold woman, the fragile boy on the tartan rug. Angus is dead, but physically Mike has grown to replace him. Isobel, though so much older, still looks like Isobel. It is the boy who has completely gone. How did we get from there to here, Mike wonders. How did I get to here? His fifty-three years, and all that they contain, seem suddenly elusive and intangible.

Still, it's Angus he's supposed to be making some sense of. Everything else is in place. He has the title – 'The Angus Angle' – easy and obvious, for exhibition and book, and Duncan Roxburgh at the National Gallery of Photography agrees. He's selected the images down to the last three or four. The original prints are being used where possible and if they're not good enough new ones are being made and will be mounted and framed by the gallery. He's written notes to go with the pictures in the book. He has a set of the picture proofs. All that's left is the introductory essay, and he can't get a fix on it. The more he worries over it the worse it becomes.

Duncan has been no help. 'How long should this essay be?' Mike asked, and Duncan said, 'As long as it needs to be. Three thousand words, five thousand, ten thousand. Whatever you feel comfortable with.' So far he has about four hundred and sixty, and he doesn't feel comfortable with them at all:

THE ANGUS ANGLE:
FIFTY YEARS OF SCOTTISH LIFE,
1947–1997 BY ANGUS PENDREICH

National Gallery of Photography 2 August–2 November 2008

INTRODUCTION
by Michael Pendreich

When Duncan Roxburgh, Director of the National Gallery of Photography, first proposed an exhibition of my father's work, more than two years ago, my initial reaction was enthusiasm, rapidly succeeded by a certain panic. This was because I knew full well that to agree would oblige me to address a matter I had

been avoiding for some time: namely, the chaotic state of my father's archive. He had made a start on cataloguing his work in the late 1990s, but a preference for almost any other activity, and then declining health, meant that he had achieved very little before his death in September 2005. It therefore fell to me to review and catalogue some 30,000 negatives and 20,000 prints, many of them unidentified by subject, location or date. Despite the collection being in far better shape now than it was in 2005, this process is still ongoing.

From this astonishing record of life – mostly Scottish life – in the second half of the twentieth century, I selected just 200 photographs to form the exhibition. All of these images are reproduced in this book, in chronological order. Some of them have accompanying notes. These notes are mine, and contain information that I gathered from my father in general conversation over the years. Angus Pendreich was sociable and opinionated, but he was extraordinarily reluctant to talk about his art, let alone write anything down about it. Consequently, where I quote a comment or observation by him I am almost always doing so from memory. I cannot, therefore, claim that such quotations are one hundred per cent accurate, although I do not believe they misrepresent what he said or thought.

Generally, my father steadfastly refused to call what he did 'art'. 'Craft' he would allow, but he consistently downplayed the idea of photography as anything special. It was not, he insisted, on a par with literature, painting, architecture or music. He believed a photograph to be the outcome of a mechanical operation undertaken by someone who happened to be in the right place at the right time. Nothing was imagined, nothing original was expressed. We argued about this, but I could never detect the slightest disingenuousness or false modesty in these views, which were all the more remarkable given his creative expertise and the respect accorded to him by his peers.

My own view is that film, whether moving or still, was the medium for *the* art form of the twentieth century, and that there is no reason to doubt its continued significance in the twenty-first. My father's contribution to that art form was not inconsiderable. I am biased, of course, but for me he ranks

with some of the other great names of Scottish and world photography . . .

At this point he ground to a halt, wondering whether he really believed that last sentence and if so what names he would insert. David Octavius Hill, Harry Benson, Oscar Marzaroli, Albert Watson? Ansel Adams, André Kertész, Henri Cartier-Bresson? *Would oblige me to address a matter . . . My father's contribution to that art form was not inconsiderable . . .* Such a pompous tone! It's not how he thinks, he hopes it's not how he speaks, so why does it come out like that? The prospect of continuing in the same vein for another ten or twenty pages makes him want to go out and take some photographs of his own, in spite of the weather, or open a bottle of wine and forget the whole exercise. How can he be writing about his own father and yet seem to be writing about a stranger? How, after a mere four paragraphs, can he have run out of things to say?

He doesn't need an analyst to work out the answers. Not really.

Nevertheless he picks up the phone and calls Jean Barbour.

'Mike,' she says. 'Well, well. And how is the frozen north?'

'Wet,' he says.

'Not frozen then?'

'No, just wet.'

'And yourself?'

'Keeping under cover.'

'Are you still being a hermit?'

'Pretty much.'

'What do you *do* up there? Apart from take pictures?'

'That's what I do. All the time. The beach, the sea, the sky, the hills.'

'Is there a limit to how many you can take?'

'If there is, I've not reached it.'

'Then I assume the chances of seeing you are slim.'

Her voice sounds terrible: faded, weak. 'Are you all right?' he asks.

'A dose of the flu,' she says, 'but I'm through the worst of it.'

He's not convinced by this, but lets it go, for the time being.

'Well,' she says, '*am* I going to see you, or have you just phoned up to tantalise me?'

'Actually, there's stuff I have to do in Edinburgh. Any chance of a bed for a couple of nights?'

‘Only if you promise to stay in and talk to me on one of them.’

‘That’s fine with me. I don’t go out on the town these days.’

‘Did you ever? What are you coming down for?’

‘A couple of appointments, to do with this exhibition of my dad’s work. Did I tell you about that?’

‘Months ago. Christmas, New Year, whenever we last spoke. I can’t remember.’

She sounds drunk. It isn’t even eleven. ‘Are you sure you’re all right?’

‘I’m fine,’ she says testily. So he knows for certain that something is wrong.

‘Anyway,’ he says, ‘apart from all that, I’d like to see you. There’s going to be a book to go with the exhibition, and I’ve to write something for it, and I’m stuck.’

‘Stuck about what?’

‘I’m trying to write about Angus. His career, his character, his significance.’

‘Oh Christ,’ Jean says. ‘Everybody has to have significance these days. Once it was just fame, now it’s significance.’

He knows her well enough to recognise a diversion when she starts one. ‘It’s tough,’ he says. ‘I don’t do words, I take pictures. I thought you could help.’

‘Write it for you? I don’t do words either. Not written-down ones.’

‘No. But I thought you could tell me about him.’

He hears her sigh, imagines her in her big, shabby, cluttered room, Arthur’s Seat visible through the window, through the rain. She says, ‘Mike, it was a long time ago. Him and me, I mean.’

‘I don’t mean that. But you knew him before I was around. Before he married my mother. I can’t talk to *her* about him. Anyway, it’s time you and I caught up properly, face to face.’

‘Aye, well,’ she says, ‘I would like that. How is your mother?’

‘Same as ever, as far as I know.’

‘So you’ve not seen her lately either?’

‘We speak on the phone. She’s frighteningly healthy. Still gardening, still going to church, still driving.’

‘Still driving you mad, you mean?’

‘She would if I spent any time with her.’

‘Maybe you should. There can’t be a lot left.’

Again, that slur in her voice. It makes him uneasy.

‘My mother will go on and on,’ he says. ‘Like Margaret Thatcher, her role model.’

‘No she won’t. Anyway, Thatcher didn’t go on. She lost her job, remember? That wasn’t all she lost, in my opinion.’

‘Mother is in prime physical and mental condition, believe me. She thrives on outlasting everyone she knows.’

‘Good for her.’ Very abrupt. ‘Well, when are you coming?’

They make the arrangements. He’ll arrive on the Thursday, see Duncan and anybody else he needs to on the Friday, come home on the Saturday.

‘Will that give you enough time to do everything you have to?’

‘More than. It’ll be good to see you.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure,’ she says. ‘I’m not looking that great.’

‘Why? What’s wrong?’

‘Old age, that’s all. Anyway, you’ll have had enough of me by Saturday, I’m sure, but you can stay as long as you like. Are you driving down?’

‘God, no,’ he says. ‘My car can limp around the roads here, but a trip down the A9 would finish it off. I’ll get the train.’

‘Very wise,’ she says. ‘Parking here is impossible unless you’re prepared to pay a fortune for it. Not that I disapprove of *that*, you understand. We’re being killed by cars.’

‘I’ll bring a bottle of whisky to take your mind off it.’

‘Good idea. Better bring two. That’ll help us sort your father out.’



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