



THE MANNIE
& OTHER STORIES

James Robertson

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James Robertson is a writer of fiction, an essayist, a translator and a poet. His novels to date are *The Fanatic*, *Joseph Knight*, *The Testament of Gideon Mack*, *The Professor of Truth*, *And The Land Lay Still*, and *To Be Continued . . . The Testament of Gideon Mack* was long-listed for the 2006 Man Booker Prize, and *Joseph Knight* and *And The Land Lay Still* were both Saltire Society Scottish Books of the Year. He also runs Kettillonia, an independent publishing company, and is a co-founder, and general editor, of the Scots language imprint Itchy Coo (produced by Black & White Publishing), which creates books in Scots for children and young people.

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& IOTHER STORIES

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STORIES IN SCOTS FOR SCHOOLS

BLACK CUDDY

THE MANNIE

NAEBODY'D SEEN HIM

THE DEIL

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‘The Deil’, a translation of Guy de Maupassant’s story ‘Le Diable’ (1886), is published here for the first time.

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INTRODUCTION

At the time of writing this (2019), I have published six novels and more short stories than I can remember. The base language of all the novels has been English, but in five of them there is also a great amount of Scots. Most of the short stories are written in English, but some also contain Scots words and phrases, often where there is dialogue between characters.

I have also written a number of stories entirely in Scots. These can be quite challenging to readers who are not used to seeing continuous Scots on the printed page, or who are unfamiliar with the extent of its vocabulary and the subtleties of its syntax. I do not write in a particular dialect, such as the Doric of the North-East, or Shetland or Glaswegian Scots, but in a form that is not specific to any one geographical area. Maybe this is because I did not grow up speaking Scots, and in my adult years have lived in different parts of the country, including Edinburgh, Glasgow, Lanarkshire, Fife and

Angus, and so my writing has been informed by a variety of Scots-speaking voices.

It seems to me that a writer working in Scotland, if they have any sensitivity to the voices they hear around them, or any understanding of the Scottish literary tradition, must at the very least acknowledge that the Scots language exists and that they either have to take account of it in their work, or have to ignore it. For me, the second position has never really been an option.

The four stories in this book are meant to introduce readers – especially readers in secondary school – to fiction in which the base language is Scots. The running order of the stories is deliberate: each is a kind of step on to the next one in terms of complexity. My own experience in schools is that young readers in Scotland, when confronted with Scots prose, sometimes see it almost as a foreign language. As soon as they hear it read aloud, however, or even better read it aloud themselves, they start to connect the unfamiliar spellings with sounds that they either use or hear every day of their lives.

‘Black Cuddy’ is the shortest and the simplest of the four stories, and should not be too difficult for S1 students. It has a pattern in which the unnamed main character, ‘the lassie’, goes on a journey, speaking in turn to different animals, and then returns, speaking to them again in reverse order. This is similar to the pattern of Julia Donaldson’s classic story *The Gruffalo*, which may have

influenced me as I was translating it into Scots around the time I wrote ‘Black Cuddy’.

‘The Mannie’ is a ghost story. It should be accessible to students across the S₁–S₃ age range. The narrative point of view shifts between characters, and the internal thoughts as well as the actions and speech of the main character, Elspeth, are shown. ‘The Mannie’ was written for radio broadcast and it might be useful for students to think about how it works as a story intended to be listened to, rather than read.

The third story, ‘Naeboddy’d Seen Him’, has a different structure again. In this one, the demarcation between Scots and English is very clear. In the passages in English which open and close the story, a successful businessman – perhaps now living in a city such as New York (the word ‘elevator’ appears in the first paragraph) – thinks back to his childhood in Scotland, a time when he spoke Scots and interpreted the world he then knew through that language. The story is about memory, place and time, and the contrast between the two languages is symbolic of the changes in all three that the man has experienced.

The final story, ‘The Deil’, is the longest and most challenging in the book. It is a translation of Guy de Maupassant’s famous tale ‘Le Diable’, and could certainly be taught to, and read by, the S₄–S₆ age range. There is quite a lot of unusual vocabulary here, but the context

should explain most of the words. There is a glossary at the end of the book, covering all four stories, so even students with little or no knowledge of Scots should be able to work out the meaning of words they may never have come across before. In ‘The Deil’, the only character who does not speak Scots is the doctor, although I hope he still has a Scottish accent. Students may want to ask why I made the decision to have the doctor speak in English.

There are some spelling inconsistencies, and use of different words, across the four stories, though not (I hope!) within any one story: ‘luik’ and ‘look’, for example, or ‘gaed’ as opposed to ‘went’. This is partly because I wrote the stories at different times, and partly because I opted for different levels of density of the Scots in each one. These are matters which can, and should, provoke discussion, even questions, about what distinguishes one language from another, or about the nature and purpose of language.

James Robertson
August, 2019

BLACK CUDDY

‘Black Cuddy!’

Black Cuddy liftit his heid when he heard the lassie cryin him, syne he wis aff, canterin ower the laich park tae whaur she wis waitin. She had a puckle carrots for him in her pooch, sweet as caramel, and she fed him three but kept yin back for efter. He let her clap his neck and his neb, and he pit his hot braith tae her lug and peched.

‘Whit are ye sayin the day, Black Cuddy?’ she spiered. He sometimes tellt her secrets when she cam tae see him. But Black Cuddy didna say onythin. He shook his muckle heid at her. *Awa up the brae tae the widds, and see whit the cushie-dooos are sayin.* Sae she clapped him yince mair for luck, and awa up the brae she gaed.

The day wis fine and the widds looked as braw as ever she’d seen them. Chaffies were cheetlin and a widdpecker chappin, the gress tummocks were saft and the maisies shone like wee suns among the roots o the trees. At the tap o the brae, in a big auld birk, twa doos were newsin.

‘Whit are ye sayin, cushie-doods?’ she spiered. *Och, this and thon. Awa tae the burn and see whit the watter-craw’s sayin.*

The watter-craw wis dookin in wee pools o the burn, lookin for her denner as the watter gaed chirlin and kecklin ower the chuckies. ‘Whit are ye sayin, wee bird?’ she spiered. *I’m ower thrang, I’m ower thrang. Awa tae the loch and see whit the heron is sayin.*

Lang Sandy wis up tae his knees in the loch. He wis still as a stookie. The loch wis a skimmerin brooch, and the hills aw about were a plaid, green and gowden, russet and reid, broon and blae. She stood and she stared, but afore she could spier it wis *Wheesh! Can ye no see I’m fushin? Awa tae the reeds and see whit the puddocks are sayin.*

The puddocks were haudin some kind o convention. They stopped when they heard her steps on the grund. ‘Whit are ye on about, puddocks?’ she spiered. But they aw took the dorts, like she’d fund them oot tellin a lee. *Nuthin, we didna say nuthin. Awa tae the bank and see whit the troot is sayin.*

But the troot wis asleep in a haud o the bank. She widna come up tae the licht. The lassie lay doon and dippit her haun and guddled, but the troot didna shift. The flees bizzed about. *We’re no feart, we’re no feart, no fae her, no fae you. Awa tae the cleg and see whit he’s sayin.*

But the lass didna gang tae the cleg. The cleg cam tae her. He landit licht as a gliff on her airm. At first she

didna jist ken he wis there. Syne she did. ‘Och, cleg, dinna bite. Dae whit ye like, but please dinna bite.’

Whit are ye sayin, dinna bite, dinna bite? I’m a cleg, that’s ma joab. Whit’ll ye gie me tae mak me no bite?

‘T’ll gie ye a secret that naebody kens.’

Oh aye? Whit’s that? And wha disna ken it?

‘Awbody. Black Cuddy didna tell me, sae he disna ken. The cushie-doods dinna ken. The watter-craw wisna sayin. Lang Sandy wisna sayin. The puddocks’ mooths were steekit. The troot wis in a dwam. The flees were jist glaikit. But I ken fine.’

Tell me then, whit is this secret?

‘Dae ye sweir no tae bite?’

Weel . . . Aye, aw richt.

‘This,’ said the lassie, lookin about her, ‘is the bonniest, brawest place in the warld. And naebody kens it but me, and yersel.’

Is that it? And the cleg bit her hard, and sooked at her blood.

‘Aiya!’ she yelped. ‘Ye said ye widna,’ she grat. She skelped at her airm, but the cleg wis awa. *That’ll learn ye*, cam floatin back on the breeze.

By, but her airm wis sair. She gaed tae the lochside and cooled it wi watter. *That’ll learn ye*. Whit wid it learn her? The flees bizzed aboot. *They* didna ken. *Whit a sin, whit a sin! We widna dae thon*. The troot woke and rose, and gawped at the lassie, and swallied a flee. The lassie walked on.

The puddocks were pappin and plowtin like parritch. *Oh man, oh man, that's some bite that. Ye should get that seen tae. Crabbit auld cleg.* At least they made her laugh wi their daft cairry-on.

Lang Sandy fled by wi a fush in his mooth. *Canna stop noo, I'm gaun hame for ma tea.*

Doon at the burnside she sat for a while. The cauld watter soothered her airm and wis sweet in her thrapple. The watter-craw watched frae the tap o a stane. *Ach, ye'll no dee o it, hen.* And she kent that she widna. But it didna stop it bein sair.

The doos were aye in their tree, yatterin on. *Och noo, och noo. Puir sowl, puir sowl.*

'I'm fine, thanks,' she said, gaun doon through the widds. But she kent they werena really speakin tae her.

When she wis back at the dyke she cried Black Cuddy, and he cam tae her, jist as he aye did. She gied him the last carrot, and clapped his neck, and he pit his hot braith tae her lug and peched.

Whit did the cushie-dooos say?

She shook her heid.

Whit did the watter-craw say?

She shook her heid again.

Whit did the heron say?

Whit did the puddocks say?

Whit did the troot say?

Whit did the flees say?

Whit did the cleg say?

'He tellt me a lee and he gied me a bite.'

Whit for did he gie ye a bite?

'I tellt him a secret and he didna much like it.'

And whit wis the secret?

'That this is the bonniest, brawest place in the warld.'

But we aw ken that. Whit for did he bite ye?

The lassie showed him the yellae lump on her airm.

'Tae learn me.'

Tae learn ye?

'Sae I widna forget,' she said.

THE MANNIE

Dinna be feart, she tellt hersel. He canna help bein whit he is. Look at him.

Sae she looked at him, and he looked back oot o grey, searchin een. As if he wis wantin tae tell her somethin. He wis auld, wi siller bristles on his chafts and thin patches o white hair on his heid, like doon on a broon spreckelt egg. A guid-lookin man, a wee bit boolie-backit but he had been tall yince, she could see that. He had on auld grey warkin claes but nae bitts, jist grey socks on his feet. *He'll hae taen them aff at the back door*, she thocht, *oot o habit*. The kindness in his face mindit her o her faither. But this wisna her faither – he wis lang deid. This wis a mannie she'd never seen afore, staunin in the kitchen as if it wis his ain.

The nixt second he wis awa. This shocked Elspeth mair than him haein been there in the first place. She went tae the back door, jist tae check, but o coorse there were nae bitts there, and when she cam back it wis as

if she'd no seen the mannie either. But she had. She wunnered whit it wis he'd been wantin tae tell her.

*

The ghaist hadna fleggit her muckle, but the fermer's wife chappin at the windae made her lowp. Oh aye, she kent yon mannie wis a ghaist. The wey he stood, no speakin, and no solid but transparent, like gauze – like the difference atween a richt plump o rain and a licht smirr. If she'd raxed oot tae touch him there'd hae been naethin there, she'd kent it athoot tryin. Sae she hadna tried.

'I brocht ye some eggs,' Agnes Fraser said, breengin intae the kitchen and pittin the box on the table. 'Fresh-laid the-day. Are ye settlin in fine?'

'Aye, thanks,' Elspeth said. 'It's a braw wee cottage.'

'Weel, we spent a bit on it, wi the central heatin and the new bathroom and that,' Agnes said. She had a harsh, raucle wey o speakin that wisna unfreenly, but Elspeth didna think she'd thole ony nonsense aboot ghaists. Jist as she widna unnerstaun aboot her paintin and the sootherin effect it had on her: hoo she could lose hersel for oors warkin frae the upstairs windae, watchin the hills and the fields and the widds and the fermhooses, jist paintin, paintin, tryin tae catch – no the details but the colours, the shaddaes o the clouds and the aye-chyngin licht. Shade and licht, that wis whit she wis efter, and

she scanced the land and the sky till she couldna see a tree or a hoose or a clood, she jist saw shade and licht, and that wis whit she paintit.

‘Och aye, it’s cosy enough, this place,’ Agnes said. ‘Noo, dinna you be blate about askin for onythin. If somethin’s no richt, jist let us ken.’

‘That’s awfie kind,’ Elspeth said, ‘but I’m fine, really. Will ye let me pey ye for the eggs?’

Agnes snorted. ‘I will *nut*.’

‘Weel, dae ye hae time for a cup o tea?’

‘I’ll no say no,’ said Agnes.

*

In the late afternoon, when Elspeth cam back doon tae the kitchen tae mak hersel mair tea, there wis the mannie again. He wis sittin in the same chair that Agnes had sat in. Elspeth said, ‘Weel, mannie, ye seem richt at hame here. Wid *you* like a cup o tea?’ Daft, but whit else wis she tae say tae him? She bylt the kettle and made a pot and poored oot the twa mugs, and he never moved, jist kept watchin her. She kent he wisna gonnae tell her hoo he took his tea sae he got it black wi nae sugar, the wey her faither had taen it. She pushed the mug ower tae him. No that she thocht he wid touch it.

‘Ye dinna bother me,’ she tellt him. ‘I’m fey, ye ken. I’ve aye been fey. Real folk bother me mair than the likes o you.’ And she wis on the pynt o sayin somethin about when she wis mairrit, whit it had been like afore she

walked oot, no kennin whit mood her man wis gonnae be in, his drinkin, her fear, the scunner and shame o it – she wis about tae speak about aw that, but she stapped hersel. Yon wis aw by wi. She didna want tae bring it intae the cottage.

‘Whit is it ye want tae tell me?’ she said. ‘Did ye bide here yince? Does it fash ye, me bein here?’

She watched, but there wis nae movement, nae shake or nod o his heid. He looked at her wi a kind o yearnin. She felt a need tae step ootby, intae the sunshine for a meenit. Ower the fields she saw the fermer in his tractor, Agnes’s man, back and fore, back and fore, wi a lang plume o gulls oot ahint him risin and fawin like papers blawin in the wind.

When she cam back in the mannie wisna there. She liftit his mug, fou as it wis, tae skail it in the sink, and it wis cauld. No jist cauld, it wis freezin. She pit her fingir in and it wis icy.

‘Och, ye puir thing,’ she said. But she didna really ken whit she meant by it.

*

‘So whit’s she like, oor new tenant?’ Bob Fraser asked, pittin the last o the plates intae the dishwasher while Agnes wis giein the table a dicht.

‘Och, she’s nice enough,’ she said. ‘She grew up doon at Muirtoun, did I tell ye that? She’s been awa for years, she says. She’s quiet, like. There’s somethin about her.’

‘Whit is it she does again?’

‘She’s a teacher. Oh, and an artist. Or mibbe she’s an artist first. Onywey, when the schuils are back she’s gonnae be gaun roon teachin aw the bairns hoo tae paint. Whit’s the word? Peripatetic, that’s whit she’s gonnae be. A peripatetic teacher. But jist noo she’s paintin for hersel. She says she could paint the view frae the bedroom windae forever.’

‘No bad if ye hae the time, eh?’ Bob said. ‘Whit dae ye mean, there’s somethin about her?’

‘I’m no jist shair,’ Agnes said. ‘She’s run awa frae a man, I doot, but there’s somethin mair. A secret.’

‘As lang as she peys the rent and disna pit paint on the carpet, she can hae aw the secrets she likes,’ Bob said.

*

There wis jist a week left afore the schuils went back and Elspeth didna want tae lose ony time. Efter her breakfast o bylt eggs and toast she niver stopped aw day. It seemed tae her that she wis teeterin on the edge o somethin. The sky turnt grey, blue, blae, black. The tractor cut across her view, a reid spot on broon. Sheep and kye grazed the green parks. She couldna wark fast enough tae capture it aw. By the time she wis done ye wid hardly ken tractor or beasts had ever been in the paintin. They were mere traces o themsels, the faintest echoes on the canvas. And if whit she’d paintit wis a landscape it wisna real, it wis mair like a

place that dreams micht venture intae, a floatin, eerie space athoot form or feature.

The ither bedroom across the landin wis whaur she slept. She aye had the windae open at nicht. The mune keeked in at her through the clouds. There were lights in the faurawa hooses and syne they went oot and it wis jist her and the mune. She fell intae a deep sleep.

But as the dawn wis risin she woke tae a creak on the stair. She sat up. The door swung open, even though there wis nae breeze. 'Is that you?' she cried. But naebody cam in.

She got oot o her bed, liftin the poker that she'd brocht up frae the sittin-room. She went tae the door. Naethin. She went tae the ither room. The greyness crept in at the windae and touched the canvases set against the opposite wa. They seemed tae be alive in the shilpit licht, like strange, un kent craiturs.

Back in her bed she cooried doon like a bairn. The uncanniness o the paintins didna mak her feart. It calmed her that they were there, alive or deid. Somethin had happened, but she didna ken whit. She felt a new assurance, that nae hairm wid come tae her in this place.

*

She never saw the mannie again, no in the cottage. She looked for him, but that wis nae use. If ye looked for ghaists they never shawed themsels. But on the first mornin o the new schuil term, as she wis loadin her car,

she suddenly got a glisk o him at the road-end. He wis lookin oot ower the fields tae the sea, but when she shut the boot it wis as if he heard it, for he turnt tae the soond, and it seemed tae her that his haun went up in a kind o greetin. She raised her haun back, and he flickered and fadit awa.

Mibbe it wisna a greetin, she thocht, as she slowed the car at the spot whaur he'd been. Mibbe it wis a fareweel: *I've seen ye richt, lass, and noo I'm on ma wey.* Jist for a second a knot wis in her thrapple. Syne she pulled oot ontae the main road, and drove aff tae teach the bairns hoo tae paint.

NAEBODY'D SEEN HIM

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 . . .

*

. . . Oot the door and doon tae the yett. Alang the street, past the blin wumman's hoose, the doctor's hoose, the hoose wi the twa nippy-yappy dugs 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 about 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 scrammled 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 sowls 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 aboot, mibbe a hoolet whaur the bell yince wis, luikin doon amang the stanes for wee craiteurs gaun aboot 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.

*

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 hurred 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 smearit gless o the windae, ayont the dreepin rones and iley tarmac and rotten fences, mibbe the rain widna be sae weat. 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 about*. And it wis true. *Ye're some laddie*, his faither said, when he'd calmed doon. *A gaun about 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. And he seen 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 between the twa o them, that wis whit the buik seemed tae be sayin, even though the saumon wid dee. But whit did he ken about luv then, its kindness and its cruelty? About the same as he kent about the Hielans. And the buik

had him cleekit, like a fish. Jist wurds aff a page but they had him.

It wis about bein ootside, 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 luv'd 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 see onybody mibbe naebody seed 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 seen 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 seen 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 in sicht. As the hill grew mair stey he grew closer tae it, a crowlin, 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 stude 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 took. 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.*

*

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.

THE DEIL

The peasant stude facin the doctor, at the fit o the deein wumman's bed. The auld yin – lown, tholin her time, but aye soond in her heid – scansed the twa o them and lugged intae ilka wurd they spak. Sune, she wid be awa. She didna girn about it, her time wis by: she wis ninety and twa year auld.

Through the windae and the open door the July sun poored in, its bleezin heat spreidin ower the broun earth flair, that wis beaten intae wee howes by the clogs o fower generation o landwart fowk. The scents o the parks ootby cam in as weel, cairried by the birslin wund – scents o gress, coarn, leaves scowdert in the midday furnace. Gresslowpers were cawin awa, fullin the hail land wi a licht nickerin soond, like that o thae widden crickets that bairns buy at the fair.

Raisin his vyce, the doctor said:

‘Honoré, ye cannot leave your mother all alone the way she is. She’ll be away any time now.’

And the peasant, douncast, said yince mair:

‘But I hae tae get ma coarn in; it’s been ower lang lyin. The weather’s jist richt anaw. Whit are *you* sayin tae it, mither?’

And the auld yin, dwynin awa but aye in the grup o Norman greed, gied an ‘Aye’ wi her een and her face, lettin her son ken that he should get his coarn in and lea her tae dee her lane.

But the doctor wisna haein it. He wis mad gettin, his fit beatin wi anger:

‘You’re nothing but a beast, d’you hear, and I’ll not let you do it, d’you hear me? If you must bring in your corn today, away and fetch the Rapet woman, for God’s sake, and have her see to your mother! You’ll do that, by God, and if you don’t, then I’ll leave you to die like a dog when it’s your turn, d’you hear me?’

The peasant, a lang skinnymalink, slow in his weys, and aw throuther wi no kennin whit tae dae, cleekit atween fear o the doctor and the fierce passion o his ain greed; hesitatit; calculatit; syne mummelt:

‘Whit’ll she chairge, the Rapet wumman, for lookin efter her?’

The doctor cried, ‘I don’t know, do I? That’ll depend on how long you want her. Sort it out with her, for God’s sake! But I want her here within the hour, do you hear?’

The man set himsel tae it. ‘Aye, aye, I’m gaun. Nae need tae fash yersel, doctor.’

And the doctor, as he wis gaun himsel, cried back:

‘Aye well, now you know, I’ll not stand for any nonsense when I’m roused!’

Nae suner wis he alane than the peasant turnt tae his mither, and in a dowie vyce said:

‘I’ll awa tae fetch the Rapet wumman, since that’s whit the man says. Dinna you steer yersel tae I come back.’

And he gaed oot anaw.

The Rapet wumman, an auld washerwife, saw tae the deid and the deein in the village and roonabout. Syne, whenever she had steekit her deid clients intae the linens they wid niver get oot frae, she wid gang hame and tak up the iron that she yaised tae smooth oot the claes o the leevin. Runkled like yin o last year’s aipples, ill-wulled, jealous, grippit wi a grippiness ayont aw belief, bent twafauld as if her back had been broken wi the endless pushin o the iron ower the claes, ye’d hae thocht she had a kind o monstrous, soor luvie o the deid-thraws. She niver spak about onythin but the fowk that she had seen gaun tae their daiths, and aw the weys o that gaun forbye; and she tellt it aw down tae the wee-est details (they niver chynged), like a hunter tellin o his kills.

When Honoré Bontemps gaed tae Ma Rapet’s hoose, he fund her reddin up blue watter for the village wifies’ ruffs and collars.

‘Aye, weel, guid e’en tae ye,’ he said. ‘Hoo’s aw wi yersel, Ma Rapet?’

She turnt her heid tae see him:

‘Jist daein awa, daein awa. And yersel?’

‘Och, I’m fine. But ma mither’s no sae guid.’

‘Yer mither?’

‘Aye, ma mither.’

‘Whit’s wrang wi yer mither?’

‘She’s about ready tae turn her face tae the wa, jist that.’

The auld wife took her hauns oot the watter: transparent, blue-blae draps ran doun tae her fingir-nebs, syne fell back intae the byne.

She spiered, wi a quick sympathy:

‘Is she that faur gane?’

‘The doctor says she’s past comin back.’

‘She must be bad, then.’

Honoré hud himsel back. He wis reengin through the different weys he micht pit his proposition tae her. But, findin nane o them ony uiss, he broke oot aw o a sudden:

‘Whit’s yer price for lookin efter her tae she’s awa? Ye ken I’m no rich. I canna even pey for a hoosemaid. That’s whit’s brocht her tae this, ma puir mither, ower muckle care and ower muckle darg! She did the wark o ten, niver mind her twa and ninety years. They dinna mak her kind ony mair.’

Ma Rapet answert him dourly:

‘There’s twa rates: twa francs a day, three francs a nicht for the gentry; wan franc a day and twa francs a nicht for awb’dy else. For you, it’ll be wan and twa.’

But the peasant wis pensefu. Fine weel he kent his mither. He kent that she didna gie up, wis thrawn, and teuch wi it. She nicht last a week, whitiver the doctor thocht.

He spak steively eneuch:

‘Naw, I’d raither ye gied me the wan price – a price for the haill job. I’m takkin a chance yin wey or tither. The doctor says she’ll be awa ony time noo. If that’s the wey o it, you win, I lose. But if she hings on tae the morn or langer, I win, you lose.’

The nurse gied him a swippert look. She’d niver yet pit a bet on somebody deein. She hesitatit, temptit wi the thocht o strikin it lucky. Syne she jaloused that he wis ettlin tae swick her.

‘I’m no sayin aye or naw till I seen yer mither,’ she said.

‘Aye, weel,’ he said. ‘Come on and see her.’

She dried her hauns and gaed efter him.

They said niver a wurd on the road. She breeshled ahint him, while he streekit oot his lang shanks as if wi ilka stride he wis spangin ower a burn.

The kye were lyin doun in the parks, wabbit wi the heat; they liftit their lourd heids and made dwaible mooin soonds at the twa fowk as they gaed by, as if wantin them tae bring them fresh gress.

As they neared his hoose, Honoré Bontemps mummled:

‘Mibbe it’s ower, efter aw.’

And the wey it cam oot, the unconscious wish wis in the soond o his vyce.

But the auld mither wisna at aw deid. She lay on her back in her seik-bed, her hauns oot on the purple calico cover, shilpit hauns, aw snorlt like the cleuks o some unco beast, or a partan's, hauf-shut wi the rheumatics, wi the trauchles and ageless darg that had been dealt oot tae her.

Ma Rapet gaed ower tae the bed and prized up the deein wumman. She took her pulse, pit her fingirs tae her chist, listened tae her souchs, spiered a question o her tae hear her speak; syne, efter a lang considerance, she steppit oot, wi Honoré at her back. He wis mair certain noo: the auld yin widna last the nicht.

'Weel?' he spiered.

'Weel,' the nurse answert, 'she'll last twa days, mibbes three. Ye can gie me sax francs aw thegither.'

'Sax francs!' he cried oot. 'Sax francs! Are ye aff yer heid? She's no gonnae last sax oors – no a chance o it!'

They argued it back and tae, gaun at it like dugs. But as the nurse wis aboot tae walk awa, and as time wis rinnin on, and as his coarn widna gaiter itsel, in the end he gied in.

'Aw richt,' he said. 'Done. Sax francs for the hail joab, but that includes washin the boady.'

'Done. Sax francs.'

And aff he gaed, lampin oot tae his coarn whaur it lay in the fierce sun that ripens the hairst.

The nurse gaed ben the hoose yince mair.

She had brocht her sewin wi her, for even when she wis lookin efter the deein or the deid she niver let up frae her wark. Whiles she sewed for hersel, whiles for the faimly, wha peyed her an extra fee for this dooble task.

Aw o a sudden, she spiered:

‘Ye’ll hae had the priest in onywey, Ma Bontemps?’

The auld wife shook her heid, naw; and Ma Rapet, wha wis yin o the unco guid, lowpit up frae her seat.

‘Guid God! Whit are ye tellin me? I’ll awa for him the noo.’

She breenged oot and made for the presbytery, that quick that the laddies in the merkat square, seein her gaun at sic a pace, thocht there had been some mishanter.

The priest cam oot strechtawa in his halie sark, wi a choirboy afore him jowin a bell tae annoonce the passin o God through the lown, birslin kintraside. Faurawa, men at wark liftit their braid hats and stude athoot movin until the white sark wis oot o sicht ahint a ferm; weemin gaitherin the sheafs intae stooks strechtened theirsels and made the sign o the cross; a hantle black hens, fleggit, fled along the sheuchs, skelterin on their taes as faur as a hole they kent, whaur they vainished in a glisk; a sheltie, tethered in a meadow, took fricht at sight o the sark and begun tae birl roond and roond at the end o his rope, flingin up his hint legs. The choirboy, in his reid coatie, wis gaun gey fast; the priest,

wi his heid, crouned wi its square biretta, bent doun tae wan shooder, cam efter him mummlin his prayers; and at the hindmaist cam Ma Rapet, boued doun and fauldit in hauf, as if she wis ettlin tae grovel wi her face in the stour and merch at the same time, and wi her hauns lockit as if she wis at the kirk.

Honoré, frae a distance, saw them gaun. ‘Haw, Faither, whaur are ye aff tae?’

The jockie wi him, mair gleg than he, answert, ‘He’s awa tae gie yer mither the last rites, God bless!’

The peasant wisna the least pit oot.

‘Aye, weel, if that’s the wey o it.’

And he turnt again tae his darg.

Ma Bontemps made her confession, received absolution and wis gien communion; and the priest gaed hame. The twa weemin were left alane thegither in the beekin chaumer.

Syne Ma Rapet begun tae think aboot the deen auld wife, wunnerin hoo lang she wid last.

The day wis dwynin; mair caller air cam in in wee souchs, causin a pictur o the toun o Épinal tae flichter on the wa whaur it wis fixed wi twa preens; the wee curtains at the windae, yince white but noo yella and spottit wi flechs, seemed aboot tae flee awa, as if, like the sowl o the auld yin, they wantit tae win free.

But she, niver shiftin an inch, her een open, no fashed at aw, seemed jist tae be waitin for the daith that wis sae

near and yet sae slow tae come. Her braith wis short noo, it whustled a wee in the sma glen o her thrapple. She wid come tae a stoap hersel sune eneuch, and the warld wid be wan wifie less and naebody wid miss her.

The nicht cam doun. Honoré cam in. Gaun up tae the bed, he saw that his mither wis aye no deid, and he spiered, 'Hoo are ye?' jist as he yaised tae dae wheniver she wis no weel.

Syne he sent Ma Rapet awa, tellin her, 'The morn's morn, five o clock, dinna be late.'

'The morn's morn, five o clock,' she answert.

She wis back, in fact, as the day wis dawin.

Honoré wis eatin the soup he had made for himsel afore gaun oot tae the fields.

The nurse spiered, 'Weel, is yer mither awa?'

He replied, wi a glint o ill-wull, 'Naw. She's better nor she wis.'

And he gaed oot.

A feelin o unease cam ower Ma Rapet. She gaed up tae the seik wumman, wha wis aye lyin jist as she had been, ettlin tae get a braith, her een open and her nieves steekit on the bed cover.

The nurse saw that this could last oot twa days, fower days, even eicht days; and sic a fear grippit at her miser's hert that she shook wi it, dancin mad at the man that had swickit her and at this auld wife that widna dee.

She set tae her wark, hooiver, and waitit, her een aye fixed on the runkled face o Ma Bontemps.

Honoré cam hame for his dinner. He seemed fine, awmaist joco. Syne he gaed back oot. He couldna say but that he wis bringin in the hairst in awfie braw conditions.

Maw Rapet wis crabbit gettin: ilka meenit that slippit by wis stealt time, stealt siller. She had a wish, a mad desire, tae tak this auld mule o a wumman by the craig, this thrawn, pig-heidit auld wife, tae tak her and wi a bit shoogle pit an end tae the sma, sherp braith that wis stealin her time and her siller.

Syne she thocht o the danger, and ither ideas cam intae her heid. She drew in tae the bed and spiered, 'Hae ye seen the Deil yet?'

Maw Bontemps murmured, 'Naw.'

Sae the nurse begun tae speak, claikin on wi tales meant tae fleg the dwaible sowl o the deein wumman.

A meenit afore ye souched awa, she tellt her, the Deil kythed tae aw fowk that wis deein. He had a besom in the wan haun, and a cookin-pat on his heid, and he wis aye skirlin and skellochin like the deil he wis. When ye saw him, that wis you ower wi, ye jist had a few saiconts left. And she ticked aff aw them she'd had in her chairge that the Deil had kythed afore in the last year: Joséphine Loisel, Eulalie Ratier, Sophie Padagnan, Séraphine Gros pied.

This set Ma Bontemps' mind ajee at last. She shithered, flaffed her hauns about, and ettled tae turn her heid tae see intae the faur neuks o the chaumer.

Suddenly Ma Rapet slippit awa frae the fit o the bed. She fund a sheet in the aumrie and happit hersel in it; syne she set the cookin-pat on her heid sae that the three short, bowlie legs heezed up like three horns; she took a besom in her richt haun, and wi her left she flung a metal watter-joug up in the air and let it drap.

It hit the flair wi a mighty brattle. Syne, sclimmin up on tae a chair, the nurse liftit the drape that hung at the end o the bed and kythed hersel, waggin and waffin, lettin oot skreichs frae ablow the iron pat that hid her face, and proggin her besom in the airt o the auld wumman like the deil in a Punch and Judy show.

The deein wife, frantic wi fear and starin-mad, warsled wi aw the strenth left in her tae heeze hersel up and awa frae the proggin besom. She even got her shooders and chist oot o the bed, syne fell back wi a lang ootskailin o braith. It wis ower.

Ma Rapet, cool as ye like, pit awthin back in its place: the besom aside the aumrie, the sheet inside it, the pat on the stove, the watter-joug on the shelf and the chair forenent the wa. Syne, in the mainer o her profession, she steekit the starin een o the deid wife, placed an ashet on the bed, jawed intae it a drap o the haly watter, dooked in the watter the sprig o yew that wis nailed tae the kist and, gettin doun on her knees, begun tae recite wi a passion the prayers for the deid that she kent by hert and by haunt.

When Honoré won hame in the forenicht and fund her, she wis aye prayin, and the first thocht he had wis that she had swickit him o a haill franc, for she had spent ainly the three days and wan nicht there,* which cam tae jist five francs, instead o the sax that he wis due her.

* I canna see, nae maitter hoo aften I read this story in the original, that Ma Rapet spends mair nor twa days, and *nae* nichts, wi the deein auld wumman. That wid mak jist twa francs that Honoré owed her at her usual rate, or fower if ye coont in wan nicht. But as Maupassant scrievit 'elle n'avait passé que trois jours et une nuit', I hae left it alane!—J.R.

GLOSSARY

- aik:** oak
airt: direction
ajee: squint, off the straight
ashet: dish
aumrie: wardrobe
bate: beaten
baukie: bat
beekin: baking
ben: into
besom: broom
birsle: scorch
blate: shy
boolie-backit: round-shouldered,
hump-backed
brattle: clatter
breenge: rush
breeshle: hurry, bustle
byne: wash-tub
caller: fresh
chaft: cheek
chaumer: chamber, bedroom
cheetle: chirp
chirl: murmur
chuckies: pebbles
claikin: chatting
cleekit: caught, hooked
cleg: horsefly
cleuks: claws
cowpit: knocked over
craig: neck
cuddy: horse
cushie-doo: wood pigeon
darg: toil
dee: die
deid-thraws: death-throes
deuk: duck
dicht: wipe
dorts (tak the dorts): sulks
(go in a sulk)
dowie: mournful
drookit: soaked
dwaible: feeble
dwam: daydream
dwynin: dwindling
ettlin: intending, trying
fash: bother, annoy
fash yersel: get upset
fey: otherworldly
fingir-nebs: fingertips
flaff: flap
flech: flea

GLOSSARY

- fleg:** fright, frighten
fleggit: frightened
forbye: besides
forenent: in front of, against
forenicht: evening
fykie: tricky
girn: complain
glaikit: stupid
gleg: quick-witted
glisk: glimpse, brief moment
gresslower: grasshopper
grippiness: greed, meanness
hairst: harvest
hantle: few
happit: wrapped, covered
haunt: habit
heeze: raise
her lane: on her own
hoolet: owl
howe: hollow
hurkle: hunch
ilka: every
ill-wulled: mean-spirited
jalouse: guess
jaw: pour
jockie: countryman,
 farmworker
joco: cheerful
jow: peal (of a bell)
jowin: ringing
keckle: chuckle
kist: chest
kye: cattle
kythe: appear, show
laich: low
lampin: striding
lourd: heavy
lown: calm
lowp: jump
maisie: primrose
mishanter: accident
muckle: much
neuk: corner
nickerin: clicking
nieve: fist
ootskailin: outpouring
pap: pop
parritch: porridge
partan: crab
pech: puff, breathe heavily
pensefu: thoughtful
plowt: dive, submerge
plump: downpour (of rain)
preen: pin
prized up: assessed
proggin: poking
puckle: few, a small quantity
puddock: frog
raucle: rough, unpolished (of
 speech)
rax: reach
reddin up: preparing
reengin: searching
rone: gutter (of a roof)
runkled: wrinkled
sark: surplice, shirt
sclimmin: climbing
scowdert: singed
scrafflin: scrambling, clawing
scunner: disgust
shanks: legs
sheltie: pony
sheuch: ditch
shilpit: weak, thin
shithered: shivered
shoogle: shake

GLOSSARY

- siller:** money (silver)
skail: pour
skailt: spilt
skellochin: yelling
skelp: slap
skelterin: scampering
skimmer: shimmer
skinklin: glittering
skirlin: shrieking
sma: narrow
smirr: very fine rain
snorlt: knotted
snuve: slink
sootherin: calming
souch: sigh, breath
souched awa: took (your) last
 breath
spangin: bounding
speel: climb
spier: ask
splatch: splash
sprauchlin: scrabbling
staucher: stagger
steekit: stitched, clenched (of
 fists), shut (of eyes, etc.)
- steer:** stir
steively: firmly
stey: steep
stookie: statue
stour: dust
stourin: dusting
streekit oot: stretched out
swick: cheat
swippert: swift
syne: then
taigelt: confused
teuch: tough
thole: tolerate
thrang: busy
thrapple: throat
trauchle: struggle
thrawn: stubborn
throuither: confused
uiss: use
unco guid: self-righteous
wabbit: tired
warsle: wrestle, struggle
watter-craw: dipper (the bird)
win tae: reach
yett: gate

STORIES IN SCOTS FOR SCHOOLS

Four short stories by James Robertson,
for students from S1 to S6.

BLACK CUDDY
THE MANNIE
NAEBODY'D SEEN HIM
THE DEIL

Cover image: "Old Willie – the Village Worthy" (1886),
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