

The Achiltibuie Stone

By

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It was stuffy in the back of the car and the seats were sticky. Nine year old Douglas enjoyed the suction feel as he pressed his legs against the warm plastic and peeled them off again.

Vrrrhmmmmmm.

They'd just gone over the cattle grid. Douglas peeked down the ravine. The old mill looked just the same. The windows still boarded up with red shutters. It seemed a shame that no one lived in such a brilliant house. He would buy it when he grew up and live in it with Kate.

Coming up on the left was Achiltibuie Stores and the petrol pumps. A collie came rushing towards the car, slobbering and barking madly, trying to bite at the tyres. Satisfied that it had scared the car off, the collie swaggered back to patrol the pumps.

The car ambled past crofts partitioned by dry stone dykes and the occasional abandoned stone cottage with rusty

corrugated iron roof. Douglas looked seaward towards the piping school where Kate's father worked.

They turned right down the steep road towards his Aunt and Uncle's house situated at the top of a croft that sloped down to the sea. He looked to his left and saw Kate's house. Almost the same but with an extension and a satellite dish. Kate's mother used the extension as an artist's studio.

At the bottom of Kate's croft he could see hairy blobs of orange and black; the Coigach herd; Highland cows, the subjects of her mother's paintings. Uncle John parked the car. Auntie Jean scurried out of the house and hugged Douglas.

"My how you've grown!"

"Hi Auntie Jean."

Auntie Jean's garish handmade rugs were scattered upon the floors like fantastical jellyfish beached on a sea of lino. Douglas ran up the stairs and opened the door to the end room. The dormer window looked out across the Summer Isles. The cast iron fireplace was still artistically filled with cones and pebbles, a scary painting of a clown hanging above it. Uncle John's brass telescope was lying on top of the mantelpiece.

Douglas opened the window and looked across to the neighbouring croft. The Highland cattle were rushing up the hill to a figure with long red hair. Kate. She looked taller than last year. Douglas grabbed a small tube from his bag and flew downstairs.

"Kate!"

Kate ran up to the gate and smiled shyly. "Hi Dougie."

Douglas went through the gate. Kate ran down the path that followed the dyke down to the shore. "Wait for me!"

Kate slowed down and giggled, "Hurry up slow coach!" Douglas caught up with Kate. He held out a tube of condensed milk, his face red from running.

"Tell me about the Celts!"

Kate took the tube of milk.

"They were fierce warriors ruled by the Blue Queen. She would offer the gods a sacrifice."

"A hamster?"

"We can use milk instead."

They arrived at the bottom of the croft. In front of them was the bullaun, a large boulder with cupmarks. Kate skipped around it.

"The Blue Queen had a special sacrifice stone. Just like this one."

Douglas climbed on top of it.

"And the sacrifice's blood would fill up the holes."

Kate held the tube over a cup mark and squeezed a white worm of condensed milk into it. "The queen asked the gods to help her in battle."

Douglas said, "Make the wish now!"

"Tomorrow at the match, Janice Wilkie will fall and cut her knee."

"Don't forget the goal."

"Oh, and Douglas will score a goal."

Kate watched the football match from the sidelines. Douglas ran forward with the ball. Janice Wilkie unsuccessfully tackled him. She fell and Douglas scored a goal.

Janice held her knee and screamed, "Foul, foul!"

That evening Douglas and Kate put some more milk in the stone.

Auntie Jean shouted down the croft, "Douglas. Dinner's ready."

Douglas jumped off the boulder and ran up the path. He took a short cut and clambered over the dyke. Some stones tumbled down and Douglas went sprawling into a clump of bracken. Auntie Jean had seen Douglas fall and ran down the croft. Kate arrived first.

"You okay Douglas?"

Douglas sat up and looked at the stone at his feet. Moss had fallen off it revealing strange markings. Kate ran her finger along a V shape.

"Runes."

"The Blue Queen's?"

Auntie Jean arrived. Douglas and Kate held up the stone between them.

Kate said, "It's a rune stone."

Douglas said, "Belonging to the Blue Queen."

Uncle John was looking through a book on archaeology. Douglas was scrubbing the rune stone with an old toothbrush. Uncle John got up, went over to the phonebook and looked through the pages.

"Perhaps the museum will buy it?"

It was early evening and Kate was playing the computer game, *Build an Iron Age fort*.

Her father, Hugh MacLeod, stroked his brown beard as he peered over an old map. "Come here a minute Kate!"

Kate sighed, saved her game, got up and walked over to her father.

"Did you find it on this line?"

"Douglas found it."

"Okay. Where did Douglas find it?"

Kate chewed her finger then pointed on the map. "It was just up from the big rock wi'holes in it."

Hugh smiled and said, "It's ours."

Sandra looked up expectantly from her game of Sudoku. "Isn't it treasure trove?"

"We'll be due a percentage."

Sandra put down the Sudoku. "Shouldn't Douglas be rewarded for finding it then?"

"That boy shouldn't be climbing over my wall anyway."

Kate turned from her computer. "Douglas could have been killed!"

"Right. Young lady. It's bed for you with no supper. And another thing, I don't want you playing around with that Douglas Sutherland."

Kate ran upstairs to her bedroom. Her walls were covered with posters of historical warriors and heroes. She stifled back the tears. A warrior princess would not cry! She heard shouting from downstairs and the sound of a door slamming. A few minutes later there was a knock at the door of her bedroom. Her mother came in with a tray of food.

After school Douglas and Kate were walking home along the road.

"And the Goddess Freya was the most powerful of them all."

"What special powers did she have then?"

"I'll tell you at school tomorrow."

"The people from the museum are picking up the stone."

"That won't take all day!"

"We're getting our photos taken at the museum."

Kate kicked a pebble. "Dad's banned me from going round to yours."

"Why?"

Kate shrugged.

The rune stone sat importantly within a display cabinet. Uncle John and Auntie Jean stood on either side, while

Douglas sat in front, facing a group of photographers.

Douglas managed a grimace. Uncle John ruffled his nephew's hair. Auntie Jean adjusted her new dress and beamed for the cameras.

That evening at Kate's house everyone was sitting in the kitchen. Hugh was staring at the photograph in the newspaper. Sandra was peeling vegetables at the sink. Kate was at the table painting a model of a broch, made from pebbles glued together on a base of plywood.

Hugh read from the newspaper, "*Professor Jörgestone of Institute said that it was the most significant find of the century.*"

Kate came over to look at the photograph in the newspaper. "What a face Douglas has on him!"

Hugh scanned further down the page and read out, "*However there is a dispute of ownership of the boundary wall where the stone was discovered.*"

Sandra said, "Kate, dinner's almost ready. Can you clear the table, please."

Kate cleaned her brushes and removed her model from the table.

"Mam, can I go round to Douglas's for a while? I'll be back in time for dinner."

Hugh looked up from his paper. "No you can't go."

That evening Kate was in her bedroom painting her broch. She heard a tapping at the window. She drew the curtains and peered out into the moonlight. A small stone struck her cheek. "Ouch!" She looked down and saw Douglas.

"Come down!"

Kate said, "Shhh! Dad will hear you." Kate crawled out of the window and down over the porch. She dropped onto the back of the dilapidated garden seat and landed on the ground.

"Dad wouldn't let me out."

"My uncle wouldn't either. But I've an idea."

"What?"

Douglas shone his torch at a tube of condensed milk in his hand.

"Let's ask the Blue Queen's stone to help. After all Janice Wilkie did fall and cut her knees today."

"Because you tripped her up. Mind you did score a goal."

Douglas passed the tube to Kate and pointed the torch beam down the path. Half way down the field they saw ghostly white figures coming towards them.

Kate said, "Ghosts?"

Douglas shone the torch and a few sheep ran away.

Douglas said, "More like ghost sheep!"

When they got to the boulder Douglas shone the torch over a cupmark. Kate filled the hole with white worms of condensed milk.

"I wish things could be like before we found the stone."

"Yes, I wish our families would get back to normal."

They walked back up the croft. Kate scrambled quietly up the garden seat, over the porch and up the drainpipe. Douglas waved with the torch then headed home.

Shiori, a young Japanese woman looked out of the window of the train. She watched the landscape pass by. She looked back to her laptop. Suddenly she peered closely at the screen. She grabbed her mobile.

"Can I speak to Professor Jörgestone? What? Shiori Isimaru. My father. No, I can't hold. Five thirty, okay. Bye."

Shiori clicked through her phone to a photograph of an elderly man.

Shiori started to gather her belongings together.

She got off at Kingussie station. She sat down and cradled a Styrofoam cup of tea while she waited for a train heading back to Inverness.

Shiori climbed the stairs and went through the glass doors of the Inverness Museum and Art Gallery. In the foyer she saw

the large glass case holding the rune stone. She looked closely at the neatly printed card below it.

"8th C Rune stone. Found at Achiltibuie, Ross-shire."

Shiori went up to the reception desk.

It was another sunny day on the croft. Douglas and Kate were standing in the background as a TV crew were filming the scene. Uncle John and Hugh had just finished building up the dry stone dyke together. They both smiled and stood back. Shiori fitted the rune stone back into the wall. Shiori said, "Rest in peace father."

Everyone clapped.

Phyllis McFudgeon, the famous TV reporter said, "And now Japanese artist Shiori Ishmaru replaces the stone. Let's talk to her. Hello Shori."

"Hello."

"So why did you place your sculpture here?"

"It's a memorial to my father. He was an archaeologist."

Phyllis said, "You must have been surprised when you saw it in the paper?"

Shiori said, "I couldn't believe it."

"I believe that the timing was fortunate?"

"I've been doing a residency here. I was on my way to catch my flight back to Tokyo when I got the news."

"Thank you Shiori. Now let's talk to the young people that found the stone."

Phyllis looked around for Douglas and Kate but she couldn't see them.

Douglas and Kate carried the milk jug down the croft to the bullaun. They poured some milk into the hole. They started laughing and running around the boulder. Auntie Jean looked down and was about to shout when Uncle John touched her arm.

"Oh let them be."

The End