1

CARMAN HILL

My father always got up well before six. Sometimes, if I was sleeping in the kitchen, I'd watch him from the bed recess when he didn't know I was looking. I would notice how quiet and economical he was in his movements. The kettle goes on first to make a cup of tea, which he drinks standing up. Milk, no sugar. He takes nothing to eat. Fills his pipe with the wad of Walnut Plug he's rubbed up in his hands. Gets it going with one match. Then he stands looking out of the window, his left arm along his waist supporting his right elbow, his other arm upright, holding the pipe in his mouth with his right hand. I wonder what he's thinking as he stands there motionless. It's getting light. What's he seeing? He turns, opens the door quietly. With a sudden pang I realise what a considerate man he is. The door snecks softly shut behind him. He walks swiftly down Random Street, left along John Street, right down Bank Street to the Leven, then north along the riverbank to the Craft.

This is where he is from, the Vale of Leven, twenty miles north of Glasgow; but he'd been away a long time, walking the streets of Glasgow looking for work in what my mother always referred to as the Hungry Thirties. He'd try anything then to put something on the table for the five of us, including carrying his own weight in cheap coal up tenement stairs. It was the war

that rescued him and brought us back to the Vale and his job in the Craft, the United Turkey Red factory in Alexandria. War work, he called it. To begin with we sublet two rooms in Bridge Street, but my mother importuned the house factors Burgess and MacLean to rent us a dilapidated old room and kitchen in Random Street. And we were happy there. Glad to be employed again, my father worked all the hours there were in the early years of the war, and we didn't see a lot of him. I too was glad to be back in the Vale, back among hills. And walking them became a passion, a passion that never faded.

It was my mother who started it. During the long double-summertime days of the war, she took me, my wee sister Helen and my big sister Gertie exploring the hills that surrounded us, and Carman was her favourite. We'd walk in through the woods of Poachy Glen, on the edge of Renton, till the path steepened on Millburn Muir and led us to the top, 800 feet up. From up there we could see in every direction, but my eyes always went north first, to Ben Lomond and the great loch over which it presided. At over 3,000 feet, it was massive rather than craggy, and from Carman it looked like a purple ziggurat. It sat halfway up the east side of the loch at Rowardennan, along the road from Balmaha, both stops on the voyage of the *Maid of the Loch*, the paddle-steamer that plied the loch throughout the summer months.

By the end of the war the family walks had petered out. Years of energetic smoking began to tell on my mother; and Gertie, five years older than me, left school at fourteen to work in a chemist shop in Renton and moved out of my orbit. Helen, three years younger, sometimes came with me; but she had pals of her own to play with and didn't always want to join me. I had pals too, but walking was something I preferred to do on

my own, so even as a boy I was a solitary walker. Sometimes I went up Staney Mollan, near the loch at Balloch, or Pappert Hill over on the east side of the river; but most of the time it was Carman Hill I returned to, back to an early love. And it was always to the north I turned first when I got to the top, always to the Ben and its island-patterned Loch. Yet the view to the south was just as dramatic. The Leven met the Clyde at Dumbarton, a few miles away, and from Carman Hill I saw it coursing into the bigger river at Dumbarton Rock, a plug of volcanic basalt 240 feet high, and since the fifth century a fortress of the British Kingdom of Strathclyde – *Dùn Breatainn*. At school it always struck us as funny that Great Britain got its name from as dismal a town as Dumbarton. Turning to the south-west, I saw the river spreading itself into the Firth of Clyde as it flowed on into the distant sea. The Clyde was a majestic river, but she was a worker as well as a queen, and wherever my eyes followed her, up river to Glasgow or down river to Greenock, on a clear day I could make out the cranes of the shipyards that lined both sides of her banks. And I knew that down below me in a few hours, workers from Denny's in Dumbarton and John Brown's in Clydebank would be getting off the train at Alexandria. Bank Street would be loud with hundreds of men in tackety boots clattering home for their tea after a long shift in the yards. But the Vale of Leven had its own industries, drawn there by the river that gave the valley its name.

From Carman I could see the Leven flooding out of the Loch at Balloch Pier and snaking its way to the Clyde. It is only five miles from Balloch to Dumbarton as the crow flies, but the Leven takes seven serpentine miles to get there. Just down there, due east of Carman, it twisted completely back on itself

at Cordale Point and again at Dalquhurn Point. And it was swift. We were told that only the Spey was faster, so we should respect our river. The Leven was swift not only because of the colossal force of the water that poured into it from Loch Lomond, the largest lake in Britain, but also because it flowed down, descending twenty-six feet from its source at Balloch to its exit into the Clyde at Dumbarton. All five towns along the river were obvious to me from up here. On the east side, going south from the loch, Balloch – really only a village – was clear; then came the small towns of Jamestown and Bonhill. Coming back west over the river, I could make out the Victorian hump of Bonhill Bridge, the link to Alexandria, the newest and biggest of the five towns of the Vale, a creature of the bleaching and dyeing industries that had established themselves along the Leven early in the eighteenth century. On this side of the river, back up the way to the loch, was the factory where my father worked. It had a Gaelic name, *Croftengea*, after a mighty oak tree that was reputed to have been a gathering place for the local clan, but to everyone in the Vale it was known as the Craft, a rambling, dilapidated dye works owned by the United Turkey Red Company.

Up on my hill, I pictured my father in there, dyeing bales of cloth hour after hour; and I would wonder what colour he'd come home tonight. He'd strip to the waist and wash himself down at the kitchen sink, and I'd furtively examine his small, wiry body. Then he'd eat the meal my mother had cooked for him, and fall asleep in his chair by the fireside. Everyone called him Wee Arthur because he was only a couple of inches over five foot. He was admired by everyone. I admired him too; but I longed for a more heroic figure for a father, big and heavily muscled like our neighbour John McGlashan, a physical training

instructor in the army and a champion welterweight boxer. Mammy had told me that Daddy had been a long-distance runner when he was young, and that he would walk twenty miles a day without noticing it when he was looking for work before the war. I liked to hear that, but I wanted him to be bigger. He was back in the factory in which he had served his time as a block-printer when he was a boy – but not now as a tradesman. They no longer printed cloth by hand the way he had been taught. Though his trade was obsolete, he'd held on to the short lead mallets that were the tools of his craft. They were kept under the bed in the kitchen recess, wrapped in a bit of cloth. Why did he hold onto them? I wondered. He was a labourer now, maybe what they called a skilled labourer, but he did not complain. Actually, he didn't say much at all, except when he had a drink in him; then he could be talkative and amusing. I liked him, knew he was a good father. He worked hard for us. It was only that I wanted a more heroic figure, larger in scale. But Wee Arthur he was, working all the hours there were, down there in the Craft or *Croftengea*.

Alexandria was not a Gaelic name like *Croftengea*, nor was Renton, down the road from it on the west side of the Leven, the fifth of the towns along the river. The dominant family in the area in the eighteenth century were the Smolletts, the most famous of them being Tobias, the novelist. We were told that our street was named after his most famous novel, *Roderick Random* – whether true or not, it was certainly true that our town got its name from Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Smollett, Member of Parliament for Dunbartonshire in the late eighteenth century, and the son of Alexander Smollett and Celia Renton, after whom Renton was named.

It was easy to make out Random Street from Carman Hill.

All I had to do was find Alexandria Station, which was at the foot of the street, and trace it back up to where it met Mitchell Street, the crescent that linked Main Street with Bank Street. Random Street was one of the oldest streets in Alexandria. Bits of it went back to the early 1800s, and we lived in one of those bits, a row of red sandstone cottages, each habitation a room and kitchen, a 'but-and-ben' in local parlance. They went back to the days when farming was the only industry in the Vale. There was no lighting in the room at the back where the three of us children usually slept, apart from the window onto the back, but we had a gas light in the kitchen, above the fireplace. You turned the gas on with a wee tap at the side, applied a match flame to the white mantle in the lamp, and a quiet light suffused the room. That room was the scene of many sing-songs after the war. Uncle Harry, my father's favourite brother, was back from North Africa and working beside him in the Craft. They spent Saturday evenings together in the pub at the bottom of the street and brought a carry-out back to the house when the pub closed. The family told me I had a good voice, and I was urged to go through the repertoire of songs I had memorised from the wireless.

Yours till the stars lose their glory
Yours till the birds cease to sing
Yours till the end of life's story
This pledge to you, dear, I bring.

Then there was, 'You Are My Sunshine', and 'Bless This House O Lord We Pray'. As an encore, and without embarrassment, I'd sing:

My mother's name was Mary
She was so good and true
Because her name was Mary
She called me Mary too.

My mother, whose name *was* Mary, would watch me fiercely, drawing deeply on her Woodbine, eyes brimming. But she was the real singer. Though untrained, she had a true and powerful soprano voice that years of heavy smoking never diminished. She came into her own on Hogmanay, when we gathered round the fire in the kitchen to bring in the New Year. When midnight came and our first-foot had sunk his dram, someone would say, 'Mary, gie us a song' and all eyes would turn to her. She'd stub out her cigarette and start, and it was always the same song she'd start with:

Bonny Scotland I adore thee
tho' I'm far across the sea
and when loneliness creeps o'er me
my thoughts fly back tae thee
and in fancy I can see ye yet
your lovely heather braes
reminds me o' departed joys
brings back sweet memories
Scotland, Scotland,
Scotland aye sae braw
my hairt is aye in Scotland
tho' I'm sae far awa
take me back amang the wildwood
and roon the rowan tree
oh take me tae my ain wee hoose

that's aye sae dear tae me
sae dear tae me, sae dear tae me
that's aye sae dear tae me.

And there wouldn't be a dry eye in the room. It was a strange thing, missing Scotland when we were right there in the middle of it, being overwhelmed with homesickness when we were sitting in our own kitchen before a blazing fire. Wherever it came from, this sadness is rooted in the Scottish soul:

> how strange was the sadness of Scotland's singing . . . the crying of men and women of the land who had seen their lives and loves sink away in the years . . . it was Scotland of the mist and rain and the crying sea that made the songs.[11]

The wee house my mother seemed to be mourning even as we lived there was 31 Random Street, and it became legendary in our memories. I have an old photograph of it, and am surprised to see that the pavement outside the cottage is not made up. Kerbstones separate it from the roadway, certainly, but the sidewalk is made of packed earth and crushed stones. On the opposite side of the street from us there was a terrace of two-storied tenements, with outside stairs round the back to the flats on the upper floor. They were characteristic of the town as a whole, and reflected its industrial growth. There were some handsome public buildings in the Vale, but most of the houses were in two-storied terraces like the ones in Random Street. Better-off people had bigger houses up the hill above Main Street – on Middleton Street and Smollett Street – but even here there wasn't much that was really grand or pretentious. And everything was near everything else. On a winter morning

I went up Mitchell Street and across Main Street to Rennie's Bakery to buy rolls. The shop wouldn't be open, so I'd go to the bakehouse round the back, where I'd stand in the warmth and watch them pulling the trays of hot rolls out of the ovens with long wooden poles. There was a Co-op store in Mitchell Street, and a fishmonger's and butcher's on Main Street. We bought sweeties at Goodwin's corner shop at the top of the street, where you could pay into a club for presents at Christmas. There was a greengrocer's in Bank Street, and other shops at the Fountain, a memorial to Alexander Smollett, which sat in the middle of the road between Main Street and Bank Street. But I haven't yet mentioned the buildings that were of particular interest to my mother and me, the picture houses.

My mother was addicted to the pictures, a habit I inherited. She usually took me with her twice a week, and Helen sometimes came too. Gertie was now a working woman with a boyfriend serving his time as a joiner, and they were both keen dancers, so the movie habit never hit my big sister. I got it badly and it stuck. Mammy and I would check the *Lennox Herald*, the local weekly paper, for the listings, but I don't think we were very discriminating and would sit through just about anything. It was an escape into romance and fantasy for me; but what was it for my mother? I suspect now it was the same for her. There was always something eager and unsatisfied about her, as if she was trying to compensate for a great loss somewhere and was filling her pockets before the sweetie shop closed for ever. An attractive, volatile, charismatic woman, she was the emotional centre of my life and I can still recall her most frequent endearment. She told me repeatedly that I was her wee ton of bricks. I loved her and hated to be separated from her. I knew the outline of her history, of course, but it was only after her death that I was able to fill in the detail.

At ten she had been orphaned and sent to Quarriers Home in Bridge of Weir, south-west of Glasgow. I have a copy of the page from the ledger of admissions that recorded her entry to the orphanage on 4 September 1917.

> Mary Johnston Luke born 7th April 1907 at 12 Vernon Street, Glasgow & Violet Vallance born 30th January 1910 at 124 High Craighead Road. Presently in care of Mrs Docherty, 220 Possil Road, Glasgow. They were in contact with Whooping Cough and are just discharged from the Observation House, South York Street. Mary is by a former marriage but known as Vallance.
>
> Father of Mary is James Luke, Iron Moulder, deceased. Father of Violet, William Vallance, No 8254 Pte. 46th Infantry Brigade B.E.F. France; presently in Stobhill Hospital.
>
> Mother Christina Vallance, formerly Luke, M.S. Johnston, 37 years, died at 202 Possil Road on 6th Aug 1917 of Heart Failure. She had been drinking and pawned the children's clothing.
>
> George, 3 years, is in Ruchill Hospital with Whooping Cough. He is to be cared for by Mrs John Kyle, 214 Possil Road by the father's arrangement.

The ledger states that there were no relatives willing to care for the three children, though the entry names an aunt and an uncle. The records at Quarriers note that Mr and Mrs Vallance had taken out an insurance policy against being unable to care for their children. Mr John Gray of the Hand in Hand Insurance

Society, 150 Hope Street, Glasgow, made the arrangements for the children's admission and for the appropriate allowance to be paid to Quarriers, then known as The Orphan Homes of Scotland. They also record that before his return to France, Private Vallance arranged for George's admission to the orphanage. Violet is noted as having 'Hip Joint Disease', for which she was wearing a plaster cast and using crutches to walk.

A later entry in the ledger goes on to record that on 7 May 1919, Mary and George were discharged to Mr William Vallance, then living in a 'damp' basement room at 30 Kelvinside Avenue, Maryhill. His occupation was given as a Lead Works Labourer, but the recorder noted that he had been unemployed since coming back from the war and was receiving Unemployment Benefit. My mother can hardly have known her stepfather when she and George were released into his care a month after her twelfth birthday. He had been a regular soldier in the HLI or Highland Light Infantry, the famous Glasgow regiment of wee hard men, and he had fought in France throughout the war. She was never explicit about what life was like for her in the basement in Kelvinside Avenue, but we could tell it hadn't been easy. By the time Violet was released to Bill Vallance on 26 September 1926 my mother was long gone. At eighteen she had already met and married my father. Violet and Granda went on living in the room on Kelvinside Avenue till his death in 1959, and Violet long after that. We visited them frequently on trips to Glasgow from the Vale. I remember going to the back of the close, then down a few steps to the basement room, which looked out onto the back court. Violet, who used crutches all her life, kept it 'scruptiously clean', as my mother put it. My memory of those Maryhill visits was of the heroic quantities of Scotch broth Violet made to celebrate our coming.

They were an unlikely couple, my parents, and not only because she was several inches taller. Where she was volatile, exciting, dangerous, Daddy was stoic, calm, uncomplaining, the steady parent. He was the third of eight children, five boys and three girls, born to Richard Holloway and Mary Buchanan, who had married in 1901. But there was a twist in his story, too. Sometime during the 1920s his father emigrated to New York, taking with him his son Dick and daughters Jessie and Beatty, leaving the other five – Tommy, Arthur, Joe, Gertie and Harry – in Scotland with my granny. There was a rumour that he had found another woman in America. Whatever the truth of it, he never came back, and for the rest of her life my granny was supported by the children who stayed in Scotland. Already intrigued by America from my movie habit, our own history made what lay on the other side of the Atlantic even more compelling. In fact, I sometimes felt I knew America better than Scotland.

What I knew, of course, was the America I saw on the screen at the Strand, the picture house in Bank Street to which I went too frequently, either on my own or with my mother. You could see what was presented on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, then go again when they changed the show for Thursday, Friday, Saturday. There were two houses each night, between which they cleared the cinema, though I sometimes managed to hide in the lavatory during the interval and see the show all over again. Most of my continuous movie memories are from the Strand. It was there I saw the Bud Abbott and Lou Costello comedies during the war, as well as the road movies featuring Bing Crosby, Bob Hope and Dorothy Lamour, whose very name triggered mysterious longings in me. And it was to the Strand we went for the Saturday morning matinees, whose

audiences of children maintained a decibel level that drowned out the soundtrack.

There was another picture house in Alexandria, one that holds a particular memory. The Hall was down at the bottom of Bridge Street, directly opposite Bonhill Bridge. It was in the Hall that I remember clearly seeing *The Jolson Story*, because the event is attached to an electrifying memory. We were a group of twelve-year-old boys, but one of us was more developed than the rest of us and had a girlfriend, whom he brought with him to the Jolson film, and in whose hole, so he claimed later, he had kept his fingers throughout the film. You don't forget a boast as unthinkable as that, one that served to confirm the erotic complexity of going to the pictures. In a society that afforded little privacy, the darkness of the cinema was a good place for sexual exploration. A rigid protocol covered the moves, all of them made by the male: the arm casually draped along the back of the girl's seat; the dropping of the hand onto the girl's shoulder; if this is not repulsed, the hand clasps the shoulder and gently pulls the girl closer (easier if you are in the two-seat divans in the back row unofficially designated for necking couples). If you got that far, kissing could start, though it was years before I knew what else might follow. But the darkness of the cinema also provided scouting opportunities for sexual predators.

We were well equipped with picture houses in the Vale. As well as the Strand and the Hall in Alexandria, there was the Roxy in Renton, a fleapit of last resort entered only if there was nothing worth seeing elsewhere. It was Dumbarton that had the really classy places. Opposite the bridge that brought you into town was the Picture House, high above a grand staircase. It was there I saw *Blood and Sand* in the early years of

the war, featuring Tyrone Power and Rita Hayworth, though it was Linda Darnell with whom I was smitten. At the other end of the town, in a vennel opposite the Burgh Hall, there was the Regent, which specialised in Westerns. In the middle of the town, in College Street, there was the Rialto, which I associated with sword and sandal epics, though it was there I saw *The Outlaw*, a Western whose main interest lay in shots of Jane Russell's cantilevered breasts. Though I can't remember the film I went to see on the occasion in question, it was in the Rialto I encountered the darker side of going to the movies.

Dumbarton was a bus ride away, and one I often took on my own in my excursions to the movies. I was heading for a Saturday afternoon show on this occasion, and I was feeling excited about life. Our local weekly, the *Lennox Herald*, had advertised the formation of a children's pipe band. Interested candidates were to sign on the following Tuesday evening at Renton Primary School. I told my parents I'd like to join, and my father said he'd take me up to register next week. Excited, I ran to Main Street for the bus. I got to the Rialto when the house lights were going down, just in time for the film, found a seat on the central aisle, next to a man with a young girl at his other side, and lost myself in the movie. Soon the man had taken my hand in his and was whispering to me. It's cold now the winter's in. You should wear gloves. I'll buy you a pair. I need to measure your hand to find out your size. Then he rubbed my hand up and down his erect penis, which was sticking out of his fly. I pulled away and ran to the lavatory. When I got home I told no one and thought little of the incident, though it must have left its mark, because it is one of the few clear recollections I have of my pre-teen years. On the following Tuesday my father took me to Renton to register for the pipe

band. When we walked into the room I saw, behind the desk, the man from the Rialto. I turned and walked out. Ah've changed ma mind, Daddy, ah canny be bothered. My father didn't challenge me, and we went home. I never did learn to play the pipes, but nor did I ever tell anyone why I bailed out.

But it would have taken much more than that to stop me going to the movies. When I got my pocket money on a Friday it was a toss-up between Kinniburgh's bookshop and the Strand, both in Bank Street, though the movies usually won. I don't want to make pretentious claims about the impact of movies on young plastic minds, but I am certain they had an effect on mine. Maybe all they did was amplify a tendency to romantic daydreaming and discontent with the reality of my life, but they certainly did do that. More significantly, they increased a tendency to watch myself playing a role, rather than unself-consciously getting on with my life. And they instilled a sense that authentic life was a drama packed with struggle against adversity, in which only heroic figures emerged triumphant. Hardly surprising in an imaginative child feeding on a diet of emotional carbohydrates, served up as 'musicals, underworlders, westerners' and described thus by Vladimir Nabokov:

> In the first, real singers and dancers had unreal stage careers in an essentially grief-proof sphere of existence wherefrom death and truth were banned, and where, at the end, white-haired, dewy-eyed, technically deathless, the initially reluctant father of a show-crazy girl always finished by applauding her apotheosis on fabulous Broadway. The underworld was a world apart: there, heroic newspapermen were tortured, telephone bills ran to billions, and, in a robust atmosphere of incompetent marksmanship, villains were chased through

> sewers and store-houses by pathologically fearless cops . . . Finally there was the mahogany landscape, the florid-faced, blue-eyed roughriders, the prim pretty schoolteacher arriving in Roaring Gulch, the rearing horse, the spectacular stampede, the pistol thrust through the shivered windowpane, the stupendous fist fight, the crashing mountain of dusty old-fashioned furniture, the table used as a weapon, the timely somersault, the pinned hand still groping for the dropped bowie knife, the grunt, the sweet crash of fist against chin, the kick in the belly, the flying tackle; and immediately after a plethora of pain that would have hospitalized a Hercules, nothing to show but the rather becoming bruise on the bronzed cheek of the warmed-up hero embracing his gorgeous frontier bride.[12]

This was the imaginary world that dominated my inner life and its inchoate longings. The comedies didn't stimulate these identifications and projections to the same extent, but the thrillers and Westerns fortified a tendency, later amplified by religion, not only to hazard roles I was not cut out for, but also to see life in theatrical rather than prosaic terms. Of course, there was a consolatory side to the movie habit that was relatively benign. I think that's what drew my mother. It was the movies that afforded the poor their best way of escaping for an hour or two from grey normality into colourful fantasy. This experience was at its most therapeutically useful during and in the years immediately following World War II, when most of my early movie-going happened. Then something else happened. Not only was I going to a lot of films, I started pretending I had been to movies I hadn't seen.

We used to take two Sunday papers, the *Sunday Mail* and the

Sunday Post, the latter for the Broons and Oor Wullie. What drew me to the *Sunday Mail* were the dramatic advertisements for films showing in Glasgow. Glasgow loved the movies, and the city was populated with dozens of cinemas. From time to time, we went up to the city to shop at the big Woolworths and Lewis's stores on Argyle Street and to see the Christmas pantomime at the Metropole near Glasgow Green. Occasionally we went to the pictures. I loved the cinemas on Sauchiehall Street and Renfield Street; much grander than anything in the Vale. So I usually devoured the advertisements in the *Sunday Mail* for 'future presentations' in the Glasgow picture houses. One Monday morning I found myself describing to a group of boys an exciting movie I had not actually been to, but had seen advertised in the *Sunday Mail*. Soon I was locked into a playground routine on Monday mornings, as a group of boys gathered round me to hear about the movie I had 'seen' that Saturday. I became fluent at spinning stories based on the information I'd picked up from the previous day's paper; and I began to feel guilty about it. One night, in an agony of remorse, I woke my mother and poured out my difficulty. It's a' right, Dick, she said. You've jist got a good imagination. Don't worry about it. Go back to bed. And I went back absolved.

So maybe it was a true instinct that led me to choose a vocation that would make me a teller of stories that could be understood as containing their own meaning within them. What mattered to my friends in the playground on those Monday mornings was that I took them out of themselves with my fictions, not that I hadn't actually seen the movies I described to them. Implicit in my fraudulence was a theory of religion, though it would take me years to figure it out. I was to become fascinated by Saint Paul's description of Christian preachers as

'deceivers, yet true'. We become *true* deceivers when we understand the purpose of our deceptions, when we admit that the stories we tell carry their own meaning within them, even if there is no objective reality beyond them, no movie actually seen, no stone actually rolled away from the tomb. Trouble comes when we understand what's going on and start feeling guilty about it. That's when we become *false* deceivers. To be a true deceiver you have to believe your deception – the movie actually seen, the stone actually rolled from the tomb by an angel. Tell your listeners that there was no movie, no resurrection, but that the story itself has its own power to release them – try to stop deceiving them, in fact – and they will turn on you. This is why many preachers become imposters to themselves out of tenderness towards their hearers.

Some of the films I saw wrestled with these paradoxes, showing just how astute movies could be. One cinematic trope subverted the play-acting response that movies could provoke, by showing how a fraud could move to authenticity and end by filling the part he had started out counterfeiting: there was the adventurer in hiding, pretending to be a priest, who ends by sacrificing himself to save the community he was deluding; there was the man, fleeing from his reputation as a coward back home, who acts himself into bravery on a foreign field; there is the kidnapper holding a young woman to ransom, who falls in love with her and dies to save her life. These paradoxes are all known to religious leaders who feel they have trapped themselves in a role they find difficult to sustain. A time would come when I would nearly die of that covenanted deception, but for years I was to revel in the power of stories to challenge and console.

I don't think my walking in the hills and my movie-going

were unrelated. Both were prompted by a need for something that did not have a name, a longing for something that constantly eluded the searcher. How can you make yourself one with a landscape? You can tramp over it, become so familiar with its contours that you never need a map, but you can never possess it. It is always eluding your desire, just out of reach, beyond your possessing. I did not know the word at the time, or the idea that lay behind it, but on the hills I was experiencing *latency*, the sense of something hidden behind what is seen. How can you find words for what is beyond sound, make visible what vanishes when seen? Poets sometimes come close:

> . . . did we see that day the unseeable
> One glory of the everlasting world
> Perpetually at work, though never seen?[13]

The hills prompted that yearning. I was looking for something beyond myself, something *out there* that would take me out of *in here* – the life that was going on in my head. I was looking for transcendence, the *beyond* that is sometimes encountered in the midst of things, usually when we are not looking for it. This is the stab of awareness that causes us to turn on our heels to catch the shadow that is behind us. It is the sense of a presence, beyond any knowing, that we reach out towards. And it can be experienced as loneliness. We are missing something, either because it is not there or because we have not yet found it. It was neither the movies nor the hills that gave me what I thought I was looking for. It was something else entirely. And it was a death that brought me to it.

There were a lot of health scares about children during the war, the one I remember being a polio outbreak that had

everyone in a panic because they thought it might have been passed on in the swimming baths all the children in the Vale went to. A boy across the street from us died of it, the first death I can remember. Random Street fell silent. Mothers clustered anxiously on doorsteps, desperate to protect their children, not sure how to. Then my cousin Mary Ann died, of meningitis. Polio and meningitis killed children, so anxiety tightened, and the street fell silent again. Because my mother was close to Mary Ann's mother, whose husband Dick was away at sea, my mother took over. Come to Cousin Mary's during your lunch-break, she told me the day after the death, that's where you'll find me. I was still there, taking my soup, when the Rector of Saint Mungo's Episcopal Church called to comfort Cousin Mary and make arrangements for the funeral. When he was about to leave he turned to my mother. Who is that young man? That's my boy Dick, he's at the Academy. Can he sing? Dick's got a good voice. He turned to me. Dick, would you like to join the choir at Saint Mungo's? We need a good voice like yours. Aye, I said. Come on Sunday for ten thirty. There's a rehearsal before the eleven o'clock mass. The Rector was an extreme Anglo-Catholic. Tall and thin, with an elaborate comb-over hair style and a face that bore the residual lumps and scars of youthful acne, he was an unlikely hero for a movie-struck boy. Unmarried – and contemptuous of priests who married – he had turned his little red sandstone church into a Catholic shrine, heavy with incense and alive with lighted candles.

We weren't a church-going family. I knew the Holloways belonged to Saint Mungo's, but I can't recall ever going to the little church that sat on the edge of Alexandria at Burn Brae. I can remember school services in Main Street Parish Kirk that ignited no interest in me, and visits to little mission halls that

had midweek meetings for children and were quite good fun. One was called the Ebenezer, and if you kept your eyes shut during the long prayer that followed the lantern slide show of Jesus performing miracles in Galilee, you got a cup of tea and a Paris bun afterwards.

My father was quietly but firmly unreligious, but my mother suggested there was a story behind his present position. He had been very religious as a young adult, she told me, but 'something had happened' – something that sounded like the death of a good friend in a fire – and he would have no truck with religion thereafter. So I was pretty much a blank page the day I encountered the Rector in Cousin Mary's kitchen in Mitchell Street.

On the following Sunday I turned up, as I said I would – and fell in love. It wasn't with the wee church on the edge of town I fell in love, but with what it pointed towards. It was a place that suggested elsewhere. I had not realised what a lovely word that was, elsewhere. It hinted at a distant gate, slightly ajar, or a slit of light high up in a battlement, drawing me into the possibility of *something else*. And the compelling mystery of it all came with proud claims as to its efficacy and meaning.

I cannot remember much about any doctrine the Rector tried to teach me, though one detail lodged permanently in my imagination. He said that the Holy Catholic Church, of which St Mungo's was an outpost, existed in three dimensions: militant here on Earth; expectant in Purgatory; and triumphant in Heaven. Thus was I initiated into a drama that chimed with the themes I had picked up in the movies, and with the longings I had felt in my long tramps on the hills above the Vale. Though a drink problem was to see him removed from the

priesthood long after he left Scotland for England – the reason I have a strong affection for broken priests – he painted a picture of the priesthood as a heroic calling, reserved for those with a *vocation*. A vocation was discerned by an inner troubling that became a summons to be set apart for a great work. It was a call to leave father and mother and all earthly ties and give oneself to a high and lonely task. The priestly vocation seemed a lot like the thrill and glamour of the movies that had captivated me, with their lonely heroes expending themselves to save the lives of others and bring them a contentment they themselves would never possess.

After that encounter in Mitchell Street, I spent most of my spare time at Saint Mungo's or working in the Rectory garden. I was less at home in the Rectory itself, which was often full of men, young and not so young, who came to take part in one of the Rector's festivals. He loved the sanctuary full of servers, of whom I became one, kneeling behind him to lift the corner of his chasuble at the moment of consecration in the mass. My imagination was kindled by the drama he had called me into. He was not surprised when I told him I had heard the summons and wanted to be a priest. Unlikely as it seemed for a boy due to leave school, he did not hesitate for a moment. There was a place in England that took boys like me, but he'd have to speak to my parents before trying to get me in. My mother was thrilled and took a job at O'Hare's fruit shop to pay for the new clothes I'd need for where I was going and the train fare to get me there. My father was compliant: 'We'll no' stand in his way.'

A few months later, not long after my fourteenth birthday, the Rector announced my departure in the parish magazine in his usual high sacerdotal style:

I have the greatest possible pleasure in telling you all that one of our Altar boys, Richard Holloway, has been accepted by the Kelham Fathers to train for the Sacred Priesthood of our Church. I think I am right in saying that since the Vale of Leven Mission was founded and raised to the status of an incumbency at the present St Mungo's, we have never produced a vocation to Holy Orders here. It should be with profound thankfulness to Almighty God that some of our prayers have been answered, at all events in part, and that we are now to have one of our own lads in residence in the famous seminary at Kelham. It remains with the boy himself now, with the help of God's grace, to vindicate the faith and trust that has been placed in him, and to make the best possible use of his eight years at the College of the Sacred Mission, accepting the rough with the smooth and the firm discipline with joy and spiritual longing. Dick leaves us in September and I feel sure he will receive your grateful prayers in his journey south, with the prayers of the faithful, that one day he shall return to Scotland and serve our Church in this dear land with perseverance, holiness, obedience and sacrifice.