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Written by Andrew Ladd

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What Ends

ANDREW LADD



ONEWORLD

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For Betty, Dwight, Leonas, and Maria –
I know you're reading somewhere

1980

I

The island's final child was born on a bleak, October evening: a boy, Trevor Alistair McCloud. At the time no one knew he'd be the last, of course, and so his birth was noted much as any other; even years later his brother and sister would remember less the event itself than the weeks before it, how their parents had shut the guesthouse early for the season, and the way the closing days of summer had left the island strangely muted. They'd revelled in the difference of those gravid afternoons, the pub downstairs completely empty and their father cooking all the meals, and their mother, usually so busy, spending her days on the sofa or in bed, exhausted but serene.

The family's first son, Barry, was seven, with coal-black hair and a splash of translucent freckles that stretched from ear to ear. He was a quiet boy, his manner unassuming, but to Flora – his sister, three years younger – he seemed practically omnipresent: a face behind her birthday candles, and the hand she held on walks, and the warm bundle by her side during their mother's stories on the sofa. His laugh, as their father tickled them by the fire one evening, was the first memory she had.

They lived on Eilean Fìor, an island three miles long by one across, and nestled in a cluster of four others off Scotland's north-west coast. Of its twenty-eight inhabitants Barry and Flora were

the only children, so from necessity, if not fondness, they were rarely far apart; they played together, and pooled their labour to get through chores, and with Trevor arriving had given up their separate rooms, too, to make way for a nursery. Flora squeezed in with Barry now on a just-built set of bunks, and despite their endless bickering about the dolls she left in his toy box, or the intricate wooden train tracks he set up across the floor, they found they liked the new arrangement. In the quiet after lights out they could whisper to each other for what felt like hours, until their breathing drifted into unison and they fell asleep contented.

Their room was on the second storey in their family's sprawling, sandstone guesthouse, across the hall from their parents' bedroom and a bathroom, and flanked on either side by the new nursery and a study, where every weekend their father would curse his way through the accounting. All of it was hidden behind a wooden door off the main staircase, with *Do Not Enter* stencilled in cracked black letters across its middle. One floor up was a converted attic containing five small guest rooms, and one floor down was everything else: the kitchen, the pub; the lobby, the lounge; the heart of the community. The pub, especially, was always busy, in summer with guests from upstairs and a steady stream of campers, and year-round with a friendly group of local drinkers too, complaining about the weather, or trading gossip, or occasionally discussing the mainland's politics and football. And since most visitors found that atmosphere impossibly inviting, few ventured to the lounge at the front of the house – ostensibly for public use as well – which instead became a family sitting room, filled with photographs of relatives, board games for the children, and the old wood-cased wireless that once they'd kept upstairs. (There was no television, the children's father having inherited his own parents' stubborn distrust of the things.)

That life revolved so completely around the guesthouse was mainly an accident of circumstance – the islanders all knew it, despite their fondness for the place. The old general store was derelict; the granite chapel towards the jetty had been padlocked shut for years. So where else could they go? The ferry to Mallaig, on the mainland, took two hours, and even at the height of summer there was only one crossing a day – two on the weekends – so the nightlife there, such as it was, was hardly worth the trip (doubly so in winter, when the ferry ran just three days a week). And while the other islands were close enough, the smaller boats they used to hop between them, for visiting the post office or the doctor or the farmers' market, struggled when the sea was even moderately rough – and when a full-blown storm descended it was the ferry or nothing. Sometimes not that either.

For a long time none of that had seemed to matter, to the McClouds or to the rest of Eilean Fìor. They always had enough food, in their vegetable plots and larders and sheep pens, to survive heartily even if the ferry never returned; they had enough water, tapped from a well near the centre of the village, to last them far beyond what they could ever need. They even had a school for the children, set up by the board of education long before Barry became its only student, back when its single classroom was regularly filled to bursting. And most importantly they still had each other, and their livelihoods, and the guarantee at almost any time of day of a warm welcome in the pub.

Or, at least, they'd had all that once. By the eve of Trevor's birth, though, that older way of life had begun to falter, and a skulking sense of the end impending – however optimistically ignored, however strong their sentimental bonds – was slowly beginning to take hold.

*

The birth itself, that evening in October, took place in the guest-house master bedroom and was attended only by Oonagh Kilgourie, a crofter's wife from the island's other side. It was an arrangement that the children's mother, Maureen, had insisted on.

'I'm tired of going all the way to Fort William to get gawked at by a load of teenage nurses,' she'd told her husband one night, Flora at their feet and surrounded by crayons. 'Oonagh and I can manage just fine on our own.'

'But Reenie,' he'd started to reply. 'What if there are complications? At your age…'

'My age! I'm only thirty-nine, George, and it's not as if I haven't done this before. People have been having weans here for hundreds of years without having to scurry off to the mainland. I don't need anyone to hold my hand.'

Rubbing absent-mindedly at his bald spot and thinking that he'd rather like some hand-holding, actually, George made some last-ditch point about the children being upset by the sight of her in labour.

'Nonsense,' she clucked, reaching down and patting Flora on the shoulder. 'Poppet, will you be all right if your new brother or sister is born at home?' Flora murmured yes, barely looking up, and with a curt *Hmph!* Maureen nodded in triumph.

The night of the birth, though, George called the region's doctor anyway: a plump, officious man from the largest island in the group, who arrived an hour later – relatively swift, given his small speedboat – and rushed up to the bedroom to take charge, his shirt straining to come untucked beneath his belly. Almost immediately he was sent back downstairs.

'Everything seems to be in order,' he said, as he reached the bottom landing. 'The ladies are, er… *confident* that they have the situation in hand.'

George nodded, unsurprised; he'd been scolded for even summoning the man. Instead, he suggested a whisky.

'Well,' said the doctor, puffing out his chest. 'I should stay, of course.' He glanced towards the ceiling, and his shoulders sank. 'But perhaps I had better stick to tea.'

'I'll put the kettle on,' said George, and told the doctor to make himself comfortable in the sitting room. When he brought the tray through a few minutes later, though, he found the man looking decidedly uncomfortable, Barry cornering him in an armchair and quizzing him on the finer points of childbirth.

'You see,' the doctor was saying, 'the baby can't come out until… Your mother needs to be fully… prepared.'

Barry leaned in. 'But *how* did it get *inside* her in the first place?'

'Ach, wheesht,' said George, setting down the tea on the centre table. 'Leave Dr Nicol in peace. He's not an encyclopaedia.' He poured out a cup and carried it across the room. 'There you are,' he said, winking, while Barry reluctantly returned to the board game he'd been playing with Flora. 'Not a moment too soon, eh?'

The doctor laughed nervously and said thank you, taking the teacup and a first, wincing sip. He swallowed. 'The McKinleys are moving away from Rum,' he said. 'I just heard.'

George settled into his chair across the room. 'Oh?'

'Aye, somewhere near Aviemore. The Post Office is relocating him.'

'Hmm,' said George, smiling gravely. 'All change these days, eh? We've three more couples leaving here in the spring, too.'

The doctor set down his cup on the arm of his seat. 'It's been worst on Fìor, hasn't it? How many in the past year?'

'More than two dozen,' George sighed. 'Six families.'

'Such a pity,' said the doctor, looking wistfully at the steam still rising off his tea.

Upstairs, suddenly, Maureen let out a cry, and the children both snapped to attention.

'Now now, you two,' said George, lowering himself from his chair to the floor. 'There's no need to look so worried.' He shuffled over to where they were sitting and put an arm around each of them. 'She's okay. I promise.'

The children nodded but still looked uneasy, so George pulled them both a little closer. 'Listen,' he began. 'Have I ever told you what happened the night Barry was born?' He winked at the doctor over their shaking heads. 'It's quite the tale.'

When their mother went into labour that first time, he explained, she'd been baking a birthday cake for Mrs McKenzie, the woman who'd run the general store; it was as she stood up from putting the tin in the oven that she felt the first contraction. But then, because she couldn't bear the thought of the food going to waste, she'd convinced herself it was nothing more than a spot of indigestion. 'She ignored it for a full three hours!' George laughed. 'It was only once the thing was iced, all three layers, and a pound of strawberries sliced on top, that she told me the baby was coming.'

'So he called me,' said the doctor, cutting in, 'and I hurried over to take them to the mainland. Except by now your father was in such a tizzy he tripped over his own feet when we got to the jetty and fell head first into the water.'

'I think I swallowed some seaweed,' said George, his voice plaintive but his face a giant grin. 'It was about as tasty as your Auntie Susan's Brussels sprouts.'

Barry and Flora giggled, and the men waited for them to settle before continuing. Dr Nicol told them how he'd taken off

his coat and used it to fish their father out; George explained how Maureen had grown so impatient – afraid, after so much waiting, that she might end up having her first child right there in the doctor's boat – that she'd refused to let George go home and change. How he'd spent the entire crossing wrapped up in a blanket and shivering in the stern.

'And when we finally got to Mallaig,' said the doctor, 'your dad was still so sopping wet that the paramedics wouldn't let him into the ambulance.'

George shook his head. 'I had to spend an hour and a half waiting for a train to take me to Fort William – and when I got there I ended up walking to the hospital because no taxi would take me either.' He smiled. 'I still made it, thank goodness.'

He paused for a few seconds, and Flora asked what had happened when she was born.

'Ach, you were easy,' he said, with a dismissive wave. 'We were so traumatized by Barry we had everything planned to a T.'

Her face fell. 'Oh.'

'But your first birthday,' he continued, not missing a beat, 'was a total mess.' And then he was off again.

The children were used to their father telling stories this way, each word seeming to give him the energy to say another five. Mostly it happened on the walks they took on mild afternoons, once Barry was home from school; they'd set out along the village road and quickly veer into the heather, hiking up hills to watch for boats across the water, or wading into sheltered dips and glens, to play hide and seek in the long grass or chase after mice and rabbits. Throughout it all George would tell them his countless, gleeful tales, filling in his childhood on the island, and their family history, and a timeline of the place's ample past.

Fìor's first inhabitants, he'd explained, were Picts, the only signs of their existence now a few wrecked foundations in the hills. Their most likely executioners, sailing through a few centuries later, were the Vikings, whose strange runes George had shown them once, carved into a cliff face along the coast. Then, another millennium after that, though the children could hardly conceive of so much time, there were the farm and fishing families who'd settled to serve their feudal laird – and finally came the village, after an eccentric new owner bought the island with the dream of making it a holiday resort. He was the one who had built the guesthouse, in the late nineteenth century, along with the newer cottages and the jetty on the island's southern tip. He was the one who had persuaded dozens of entrepreneurs, George's grandparents among them, to move to the island with their families, and cater to the tourists he was sure would soon arrive.

And arrive they did, hundreds each summer – thousands, even, in the best years – on an endless stream of cruises up the coast. The ships would drop anchor early each morning and their genteel passengers would swarm ashore, buying woollen souvenirs at the village craft shops, sending novelty postcards from the general store, and wrapping up the afternoon nibbling on scones and sandwiches in the guesthouse tea room. (The pub came much later.) Then, in the evenings, they'd disappear just as quickly, back to their ferries and away to sea, leaving behind the island's few hundred inhabitants and a handful of wealthier tourists, usually, who'd paid to spend some time ashore.

With the Great War things changed, of course. It simply wasn't safe to gad about the Atlantic any more, even in the relatively sheltered sea around the Hebrides. *Your grandfather*, George told the children, while sitting at the island's highest peak one day, *used to come up here*

and look for submarines. He pointed out across the ocean. *You could see their shadows beneath the water, he used to say – like little black slugs, slithering along*. He put extra emphasis on *slithering* and leapt towards the children as he did so, his fingers wiggling; they laughed and shrieked, and scattered for the path.

After the war things started to pick up again, but then the thirties came, and the Depression, and after that the tourists increasingly stayed away. The population shrank; the island's owner was forced to sell. And at that point George would always change the subject, or gloss over the details, refusing to say more even when the children asked. It was only from Mr Lewis, the island's schoolteacher, who'd been there just eight years himself, that Barry learnt the truth: whereas the old owner loved the place for what it was, the new one was simply an investor, convinced the island would be a lucrative source of peat. When that came to nothing he raised the rents instead, and while the few who could afford to buy their homes and land outright at that point did so – the McClouds and their guesthouse among them – the poorer families were forced to leave. *And they never stopped leaving*, Mr Lewis explained to Barry, sitting on the edge of his desk with his glasses sliding down his nose. *Even after the old crab died and his children donated the land to the Trust, they didn't want to stay*. He pushed his glasses back up as Barry, straining forward in his seat, asked: *why?* The teacher had shrugged. *Who knows? Sixty people left in five years. It was half the island. Probably the rest of them just couldn't bear to see it*.

Barry later passed the story on to Flora, though in his retelling the details were inevitably smudged. The parts he'd failed to understand (rent, wildlife trusts, nostalgia) were left out altogether, while the landlord became a literal crab – a seven-foot-tall one who'd chased

away the other islanders. His pincers cut people clean in two in Barry's version, and Flora hid beneath her blankets as she listened.

This was their habitual way of absorbing the adults' stories: as jumping-off points for their own, inventing whole sagas around the tiniest of details. In their universe, the runes along the coast had been carved by a Viking murderer who'd been exiled to the island as punishment for his crimes; before him came a Pictish sorcerer, who'd conjured the island from the sea. There were winds so dreadful, they imagined, they could blow children clean away, and thunderclaps so booming they left others briefly deaf. And then there were all the ships they imagined sunken just offshore, whose contents would have washed up for days following a wreck: enormous jewels and treasure chests fit to burst, and exotic, long-extinct animals, who would have shook their long fur dry as they'd lumbered up the beach.

If the two of them were often lost in imagination, though, they hadn't failed to notice the island's population still trickling away; they had grown accustomed to the procession of tearful goodbyes in the pub, the postcards from expatriates in mainland cities, and occasionally the strangers they'd see knocking on village doors. *Why are all those people going to the Leslies' house?* they asked at dinner one night. Their mother snorted. *They're thinking about buying it*, she said. *I doubt they will*. And she was right. Except for the old laird's manor, which sold to a Glaswegian woman the year before Trevor's birth, the rest of the village homes ended up abandoned.

Still, the children weren't bothered by the constant departures; if anything they liked the island emptier, as it gave them more scope to play. There were fewer extra eyes to report their bad behaviour to their parents, and fewer spots off limits – and increasingly they roamed as they pleased around the silent houses, and the empty

churchyard, and the musty old barns in the hills. Or else they would run off along the road, a mud track mixed with gravel and crushed shale that ran straight across the island, following it to the crofts on the north shore or, more often, to the jetty on the south. From there they could watch for seals around the distant skerries, or carry on down the coast, searching for shells along the island's pebbly, seaweed-covered shores.

On a map, they knew, those shores followed an outline like the wing of a maple seed; their father had shown them one on a Christmas visit to their cousins' house in Perth. *Look*, he'd said, pointing to the seed compartment with his pinkie. *This is where the puffins nest*. He moved his finger towards the centre of the wing. *And this is where we do*. The children nodded, picturing the map of the island that their father displayed proudly above the bar, acknowledging the similarity – but for some reason the image failed to resonate. Perhaps, with the island's only trees marooned in a plum orchard behind the laird's manor, the seed itself seemed too foreign to relate to home. Certainly the yellowing, dried-out pod seemed a world away from their own experience of scrabbling around the coast, and over the island's pea-green hills and concertinaed, basalt cliffs, leaping the tiny burns that crossed the path every few hundred feet.

More than that, though, there was the Stùc, the tiny spur on the island's north coast that ruined the maple seed outline. Once upon a time it had formed a natural harbour, their father told them, which the Vikings would have used in the centuries before the jetty. *You see how it looks like an arm, ready to give someone a big hug?* he explained, sticking his left hand out in front of him as they gazed down at the Stùc from a nearby cliff, then wrapping his outstretched arm around his right shoulder. *Well, that makes the water in the middle calmer, so boats could have docked there when the seas were rough*. He stuck his right hand

in the crook formed by his awkward self-embrace, and waved his fingers at them. *See how comfy they are in here?*

The children laughed at the analogy, though like the seed pod it wasn't perfect: the Stùc was an arm only when the tides were low; the rest of the time it was a separate island, connected to the north shore by a small causeway and nothing else. *The old laird built the bridge*, George told them one afternoon, as they watched the wide, sandbar isthmus disappear beneath the water. *He wanted his house over there so he could holiday away from the riff-raff – he just didn't want to wait for the tide to go in and out*.

Barry frowned at that and asked why, if he'd wanted to be left alone so badly, he'd built the school on the Stùc as well. George grinned and ruffled the boy's hair. *Don't miss much, do you? It wasn't a school to begin with – it was the old servants' quarters*.

Then it was Flora's turn to frown, and ask why the laird had needed servants, but this time George only shook his head, chuckling to himself, and told her that was a story for another time. *Now come on*, he said, turning towards home. *Let's go find some dinner.*

By eleven o'clock, the lounge's campfire atmosphere had largely vanished. The children had finished their first board game and had already played another, and now Flora was back to her usual drawing while Barry, nodding off every few pages, struggled through a Roald Dahl book on the sofa. Dr Nicol, in the meantime, had given up the fight and was snoring softly in his chair, while George, chewing at the end of a pencil, muddled through *The Scotsman*'s cryptic crossword.

Against that quiet, Mrs Kilgourie's footsteps on the stairs were practically thunderous, and George's head jerked up at the sound of them; by the time she reached the sitting room door he was already half-way there himself, and when she announced the baby boy's

arrival Flora jumped to her feet, too, asking loudly if they could see him, and jolting Barry and the doctor awake.

Mrs Kilgourie nodded and led them all upstairs, to where Maureen lay clutching the baby, her hair matted and a few streaks of red on her bedclothes. George approached her first, sitting down on the edge of the mattress and planting a kiss on his wife's cheek as he leaned in for a better look at the bundle in her arms.

'Another chip off the old block, eh?' He gave the blanket a gentle pat.

'I bloody well hope not,' said Maureen, smiling.

Barry stepped forward, his eyes flitting between the baby and the bloodstains. 'Are you okay, Mum?'

'Aye, Barry,' she said, looking away from George. 'Just a wee bit tired.'

At that, the boy edged closer still, eventually reaching his mother and, with some encouragement, pulling back the edge of the baby's wrap. His eyes widened. 'He's all purple, Mum!'

In the doorway the doctor cleared his throat. 'That's normal, Barry.' He glanced at Mrs Kilgourie. 'Sometimes being born can be just as hard on the baby as it is on the mother.'

At the sound of the doctor's voice Maureen looked up at him, and then to his right, where Flora was still fidgeting with a crayon she'd carried from downstairs. 'Come on, dear,' she said. 'Come and see your brother.'

Nodding silently, Flora walked across the room, Barry moving aside to make way for her by the bed. And as she finally looked down at Trevor – at his tiny, puckered eyes, and his dab of a nose – the frown on her face softened, and she reached forward to stroke his cheek. 'He looks nice,' she said, glancing up, and Maureen smiled back in approval.

After a few more seconds, Mrs Kilgourie bustled forward again. 'Right,' she said, placing a hand on each of the children's backs. 'That's enough. We've things to do.' She ushered them to the door, where the doctor was still standing looking gormless. 'You too, Mr Nicol,' she said. 'George will make up a guest room for you.'

'I… yes,' said the doctor. 'Thank you.' He stepped into the dark hallway with the children.

'And you bairns,' Mrs Kilgourie added, already closing the door behind them, 'get yourselves to bed. I'll want your help with breakfast.'

Behind her Maureen called out goodnight, but the door was completely shut before they could reply – leaving them to share a look of confusion with the doctor before brushing their teeth in silence and putting themselves to bed. It was the first night they could remember not having their mother tuck them in, and the first of many repercussions that Trevor's birth would have: his arrival on the small, declining island was a pebble dropped in a pond. A dying stillness, momentarily disturbed.