Broad Bay

Abstract
You slept for the best part of a day. You woke to inform me you'd had enough of sitting and being travelled by trains, aircraft, ferries. Now you wanted to do some walking. But eating first. You were hungry. Then you were a bit bashful and added bits about only if it was alright with me- you hadn't even asked if I was working today and what had happened to yesterday? You smiled but there was a question mark hovering over your head as surely as if the cartoonist had just placed it there. I said it would be better than just 'alright', I was on the later shift. Your English was getting rusty. Better than my French and the German I didn't have.
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I went across the road to the bakery for rolls and the teabread I remembered you liked. A mixed bag of girdle scones, oven-ones and pancakes. We ate and then took the bus, past the airport, to Melbost. Through a larch gate and we were on the marram grass under a yellow winter sky. It was August.

We passed by someone with his dog. One of the few people who walked here most days. Most of the usual walkers, habitués of the shoreline, had dogs. Working collies or the bigger pet breeds, ones that needed to get out. This man had stopped me once and told me that he remembered my uncle coming here to swim, most days in the year. That was after the run from town, with a run back to follow.

This time, he admired your hat – hand-dyed, hand-spun. He was old enough to have a memory which recognised that but he’d never encountered one with such a long tassel. You wanted to give it away to him. I rested my arm on your jacket sleeve to warn you. The poor man would have been embarrassed.

It was the wind then, from the North-east, not that strong but funnelling down and Broad Bay not looking its usual benign self. You talk of it like a person, you said and I said, yes. You were amazed at the scale of these sands, at low-water springs, from the outcrop of conglomerate at Melbost stretching, broken only by groynes and one more tidal island to more harsh rocks at Aignish, under the old cemetery. We could go there and see the Macleod stones. Weathered carvings.

But, walking, you asked, in that direct way, what this Bay meant to me. You sensed something. No. No-one I knew well had drowned. Someone I used to fish with had lost a son. But that was before I was aware of
these things and it was further up anyway, where the river went in, north of the town and what you might call estuary, really. Broad Bay hadn’t been too bad to me.

We looked over the coiled patterns across the cold shallows. Lungworm casts in the muddier areas and bleached razor-shells in the cleaner ground. Rich feeding.

The best haddock came from there, I said. You asked why it was ‘came’ in the past tense and not ‘come’. Bigger boats with bigger nets, electronics in the wheelhouse, markets or just the times, changes. I said it all like that, unfairly. You were surprised at the emotion and I was unwilling to expand.

We didn’t hold hands. We were close, though and left the Macleod stones for another day. You pressed me for the story. I warned you it wasn’t so easy to stop me.

I might not know High or Low German but haddock were ‘schellfisch’. You recognised the word. Not often seen in Switzerland except on the contents list of frozen packets. You didn’t have a clear picture of the fish to go with the word.

We looked again to Broad Bay and across to the watchful column of Tiumpan Head light. Shift your eyes from there and take a big sweep to the north. We’ll start from there, though we can’t see it. There’s the harbour at Port of Ness, then Skigersta, with a slip and both of these tricky in any swell. Going south, there’s Cellar Head and a geo – that’s a steep inlet where you could just about haul a boat up from the sea – at either side of it. Ruins of fishing bothies built into the side of the hill. Then Tolsta village with a jetty, tidal and seeming dead with useless bollards now looking like rusty sculptures. It could never have been any good, towards low water but it must have been worth all that went into developing it, once. Let’s make this clear. The fishing, for the full reach of Broad Bay, had been good. Note the tense.

That jetty at Tolsta made you think of the inland sea in the Soviet Union, where the water had dropped back. The sources had been harnessed for irrigation schemes and the trawlers or drifters or whatever they were lay stranded and dying like beached whales. On this island the stem and stern posts of redundant drifters were still alive as oak posts, taking the strain of fences.

But on Broad Bay, it had been line-fishing. Take Brevig, another geo, hiding under the villages of Coll, Back, Vatisker. Not great shelter but the harvest had been worth the risk. Cod, plaice, dabs, whittings, yes but the haddock was the fish. How did it look?

Like St Peter’s fish. Not to be confused with the French for John Dory. The thumb-marks are on that one too and the Norwegians, it has to be admitted, call it St Peter’s fish, as well. But that’s not what I was taught. I was shown how to tell a haddock from a whiting by that mark. At the feeding of the multitude, when the catch was shared, the print was seared
into the grey black flank of the haddock and it’s there yet. There was more than five thousand fed from Broad Bay.

I think I grew more self-conscious then, surprised at my own intensity but you were happy with my role. I wouldn’t give you the standard tour. I betrayed feelings.

Small-lines had only about a hundred snoods – that was thinner, shorter pieces spliced to the main line. Each had a small hook, baited with mussel or herring strip and worked from a smaller boat than the Ness ones which worked deeper water with the great-line.

Yes, there was one Brevig boat left. She hadn’t been broken at her keel or worn to death by being winched up that geo. Even stranger, she hadn’t been burned or broken-up when the fishing was done. She was sedately moored in Stornoway harbour and was simply named Broad Bay. A Coll man had done all right on the fish and found the capital for a shop. Became a merchant. Others did the catching but he too must have had a memory because he wouldn’t let the boat go. He had her engined, put her mast in the loft and there she was like a double-ended harbour launch with mahogany seating. Some might say she’d gone up in the world, like the guy himself.

Others preferred her as she had been. Lighter. Everyone you talked to in Coll seemed to have been on her at one time or another. She had a distinctive stern shape, with the bend in the top planks going two ways then meeting their opposite numbers in the oak sternpost. Once you saw one, with that line, you’d know another.

I’d chased her history. ‘Loch A Tuath’, the North Loch, Gaelic for Broad Bay, had been a red herring. That name had been stencilled on the bow of a Ness-built boat which was much more recent than the fish-merchant’s.

Then I’d approached research the right way. I talked to the Fishery Officer I knew, working in the office where all the old registrations were kept. No art. I said what came into my head. Did he still listen to Hendrix? Yes and he still plugged the stratocaster into the amp now and again. Only for himself, well except for the odd gig, if it was somewhere he fancied and the company was good.

He turned her up for me. There she was on a page of finely handwritten entries. Broad Bay. SY 594. 1912. Durness. No, not Deerness, Orkney. Definitely Durness.

I’d to resort to the phone, to trace the boat builders. A father and son, Angus and Anson Mackay built Orkney yoles at eighteen to twenty feet, for Lewis customers. So she’d come over, out of Loch Eriboll into weird tides, under Cape Wrath and into the Minch. The new sail must have been creaking as it stretched, the crew getting the feel of the boat, maybe sorting the ballast as they made for Tiumpan by dead-reckoning.

And bits of her were still afloat. But you were cold now, through the Harris wool gensey I’d lent you. And I was gabbing on. That easterly
wind had some bite. We were lucky to see the long and nearly empty bus at the turning-place, the driver having a smoke.

You were caught by the thought of these fish. Miraculously you asked further, over tea. You were getting used to the brew, simmered a while on a ring of the cooker. I would have been happy to talk more about fish but I had the back-shift to do.

You were still up when I got back. My father was in bed. In our kitchen, you opened Davidson’s ‘North Atlantic Seafood’ and we heard the three blasts as the ferry came in, operating astern propulsion, against the wind which had veered to the south and picked up.

Some people were happy to read Raymond Chandler again, on their holiday, content with style and not even bothered about sorting out events in the narrative. You’d gone round the corner to find the bookshop I’d described and asked for a detailed work on species of fish.

If they were for cooking as well as for looking at, this was the one, the man in the shop had said. You told me that this author, Davidson, called them thumb-prints as well. This is the quote: ‘In this the haddock resembles the John Dory and fishermen of Boulogne therefore call it faux Saint Pierre...’

Pity they’ve got that the wrong way round, I said and you livened to a debate, taking the hook and quoting from that work to say that John Dory was St Peter’s fish to the Portuguese, Spanish, French, Swedish, Norwegians and Danish.

But I knew that it was really haddock which were mentioned by Mark, Luke and John. You didn’t see so many John Dory in the inshore waters round these islands. But, you said, there was bound to be other species with thumb-prints and wasn’t the Sea of Galilee fresh-water, like that inland sea in the Soviet Union?

Don’t talk science to me, woman, I’d said. Everyone I knew, who’d given me instruction in fishing – and they ranged from real townies to my relatives on the West Side – they all said the same. That print on the haddock was burned into my senses at an early age.

We gave up on rhetoric then. I can’t remember if our fingers touched, across the table, then, by that open book. I know I wanted them to.

I slept late in the morning, tired from that last back-shift and preparing for the changeover to the killer first night-shift. You had made a salad. I tried not to look wary as you blended mustard, cream and a touch of sugar with oil and vinegar. You were impressed at the Webb’s Curlies grown in a fish-box which had been converted into a cloche by nailing a half-barrel-lid at each end, to take the curve of polythene. You have to defeat the wind, to grow anything here.

I could listen then to your openness. Not so many details but you told the bits that mattered. Your intensive training in Therapy. Family illness. Your father first and then your mother. Nothing that would get better, in either case. Tragedy wasn’t really too strong a word. Your letter was short
notice of your coming over, you knew, but you had to have a rest. That could be an active one. I wasn’t to worry.

The mood changed again, as we couldn’t have sensed it would, when you admitted you’d stopped at the fish-shop. It was still called Broad Bay. It must be the same one, you realised, even if the owner was different. You had even seen what must have been haddock, in the window, but had lost courage. You were shy of cooking fish for me. I seemed to be an expert.

I was ashamed. Only obsessed, I said and you should know by now not to get me started. One thing she wasn’t clear about – did I use to be a fisherman?

She had to promise not to be disappointed, losing the illusion of meeting a real, wild Hebridean. I’d never had to fish for my living. Even now, I helped a friend out sometimes but I always had a choice. I’d go out, on days off, if it suited me.

Even if I wanted to, you wouldn’t let me play it down. You really did want to know. The hook and barb had gone through. So I told you how I’d set lines once or twice.

Usually I’d gone angling with a fair bit of technology. We all read the catalogues. We even shared an echo-sounder to detect a bo – that’s an underwater reef which would foul a net and so couldn’t be trawled over.

Once, our plans to round Tiumpan Head, going north, met with the right conditions. The twenty-five footer cut glass most of the way and you were aware of the vibrations from the three cylinder engine. We’d have been excommunicated from the Sea-Angling Club and banned from competition-fishing for life. We had three long-lines, coiled in wicker. The skipper directed me in keeping the sequence as I baited each of them. Even one hook flying free and it could get messy.

A float, twenty fathoms of cod-line, a weight then the sequence of a hundred hooks flowing out true to another weight, another twenty fathoms and the second float. If you lost one end, you still had a chance of recovering the line.

The skipper showed us a transit. Out of the bay, holding the Tiumpan on the quarter and looking northwest to the skyline till you made out Muirneag. Standing from all that flat ground you could just about call her a mountain. Holding Muirneag and Tiumpan steady till you picked up your cross-bearing, to fix your mark. But that was deeper water. Not for us today. Soon it maybe wouldn’t be for anyone. Boats that had used up other quotas, moving in. It was getting dragged to death down there, the small stuff choking amongst the prawns. The line was selective. Like the drift-net for herring. And exciting with it.

We were after the soft patches, with rough ground that would rip any gear, all about it. We found some. One line was heavy, rasping with dogfish that no-one wanted. They ate them on the West-Side. Cured them first, in salt and oak-wood smoke. The second line had been on the
nursery slopes, coming up with clean hooks and a few small fish, which we returned, save for some reasonable whiting. I won't forget our last line. The hypnotism of looking down to see the catch come up like washing on a string. Blank areas, as if the wind had done the damage. A few slimy snoods, broken or bitten off. Yes and what we had come this far to catch. Several smaller groupings of decent haddock, hefty and nodding, with bulging flanks. They came over our port gunn'le as our bow was held off what little wind there was.

A scallop had been gripped on one hook. The skipper took his knife to the shell and put the fruit to his mouth. They eat oysters like that, he said. I shook my head but tried the next one when it was held out to me. I swallowed it whole.

When we brought the boat back to the mooring, there was another ritual, foreign to me till then, but adopted by me since. Being the youngest, I was to make five equal piles. Yes there was four of us but one was for the boat's expenses – or for the one who took responsibility. I was to turn my face the other way then as someone pointed and asked whose pile that was. I called the names. The boat's. Willie's. Mine...

I knew you were with me, all the way when I told you these things. But surely there must be some of those fish left, you said. I said, yes, the stragglers but did not try to explain further.

You were surprised, some days later, the night-shifts near done, when I said I would go down to the Club Weigh-In. I don't know why I wanted to. Our crew of that day was scattered and the man I'd call the skipper had gone off everything to do with clubs and competitions. He'd fallen out with the committee and wasn't too fussed, because he'd lost his taste for weighing and photographing big dead fish that didn't always get eaten. Maybe I went because I'd see some other people I didn't want to lose touch with.

When I got over to the west side of Number One pier the chartered boats were coming in to berth. I had a full set of smock-oilskins on, looking the part, as the rain came down thick. Not much wind behind it. I wore clogs, like the East Coast boys, working on the immense purse-nets, laid out on Number Two.

I gripped the rope that someone threw and I suppose it all looked right. I thought I was ready. Made the nod. The man on deck below was not the skipper. That was maybe the thing. He didn't want to do or say anything that would look assertive. He should have shouted up to me, from boat to pier, to keep me right. He kept his sea boots on that deck, teeth on his tongue.

I put weight on the rope but it was against the strain on the gantry. Below me, hooks went into the cut-out handles of the bottom fish-box of three, all stacked together. A murmur was starting to go round the pier. They'd hit them. Pretty well ideal conditions with the tides on neaps.
They'd found the haddies. I didn't have to ask where they'd come from. I thought I'd seen the last of them.

A single fish was placed on the top box, the thumb-mark prominent. I began to haul. The catch should have swung to the other side of the post on the pier. There should have been waiting arms. I should have called over to someone else, someone in the forming crowd at the point of Number One, trying to get a glimpse of some of this catch.

The boxes were coming up, bridled together and swaying. The block on the gantry was running fine. It was working after all. You could see at a glance that these fish had never been in a net. A haul from out the blue. The broad blue.

The pull became jerky. I remember the feel becoming awkward. It wasn't a question of strength. I wanted again to shout for someone but didn't. I don't know why. The three boxes glanced against the concrete rim of the pier.

That guy on deck did not seem to stir in his boots when the fish which had come from below came tumbling on him from above. The boxes hit the gunnell just as the swell was taking the boat a yard or so from the greenheart piles. The cluttered decks were strewn with haddock, a few speckled things among them. But the black harbour water, between the smudged black gloss of the boat and that pier, bulged with haddock forms.

If I'd moved quickly, I could have brought a lot back. I just looked down. There had to be a gaff aboard. That booted figure kept his stance. He knew that there wasn't any gaff or long-handled net aboard so there wasn't much point in rushing about. So he was calm. The few other people on the pier who had seen what happened gasped, looking down at the pale bellies in the water, now spreading out on the tide. The fish would be wasted. The fat harbour seals would get them.

I don't know if it was these watching people who stopped me from trying something. Maybe it was the thought of clambering down a weedy ladder, in clogs or bare feet, to try to recover the fish by hand. All this rational stuff comes only now, after it all, as I'm trying to return the honesty I owe you. At the time I think it was simply a feeling. Stumbling around wouldn't have brought the fish back and would have felt wrong, like the jerking tensions on that rope, working against the swing of the gantry.

So I didn't make a big thing of saying sorry, looked down to the angler I knew - who would have won the competition - then took my end of the rope round to the other side of that post. Hooks went into handles again and boxes began to come up, smoothly enough but only one by one, to the waiting arms.

My Swiss friend, that is the full story of the schellfisch, which I didn't tell you at the time. I grudged you the bare realism when you returned from your big walk, hungry. I just pointed to the bundle of newspapers.
by the sink. We unwrapped them together and, even faded, they were still beauties. It was you who said it. Here was the real St Peter's fish.

All I said was, yes, you'd been right, there was still some of those fish left. Let's just say that people I knew had been out on Broad Bay. They'd found them and taken them, their baskelfuls from their mark.

I took the knife to one and you shuddered. The head was left on and I took the white liver to mix with oatmeal, seasoning and a touch of chopped onion. The stuffing went back inside the mouth, down to the gills. You were horrified but I said the only way to cook it was this way and simmered, whole like a salmon, but in milk, with leeks.

You were sad at the head with opaque eyes staring up at you, as you said. Yet you ate. You ate from it all, everything here and not just so you could say you had tasted our traditions. That is why I think of you now and can say how you moved me and still move me.

I couldn't say it then as I couldn't admit to my part in the waste in the harbour, the spilled boxes. Maybe if I'd been able to talk, quietly, about what was between the more lyrical memories, we might have touched. And if we'd touched, you might have come back to me.