

BUILDING BADGER'S CAIRN

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

The rain finally lets up, so I shrug the tarpaulin off my shoulders, stand up and get back to work. I grab one of the few stones left in the pile, a smallish one, hefting it into the crook of my neck with one hand, like a shot-putter, so I can place it on top of the cairn, which is now almost shoulder height. But it won't fit in the space I thought it was destined for, so I throw it to one side and cast about for a slightly smaller one. There it is, lying abandoned in the grass.

The stone which the builders rejected...

A week ago, this cairn was just a patch of bare earth, with four pallets of roughly dressed, fresh yellow sandstone sitting beside it. Day by day, those cubes of stone diminished and this rounded structure grew: a crafted thing, built with love and skill. It started with a sketch, then I ordered the right volume of stone based on calculations with πr^2 . It's really a contradiction to *build* a cairn; the ones on hilltops grow gradually, the un-engineered work of hundreds of pilgrims. Call this a tumulus, then. Each stone commemorating one day spent with Badger, one thing I learned from him.

"Take your time, lass," he used to say. "A dry-stone wall's got to stand for a hundred years or more, without any mortar to hold it together, no matter how many sheep scratch their backsides against it. You can spare five minutes to find the right stone."

"I've been looking for ages! The ones that are short enough are too thin, and the ones that are thick enough are too long."

His kind eyes were full of patient understanding. "Then we've got two options, haven't we? Either we can stack two or three of the thin ones, or –" he felt behind him in the grass. "Or we can call on our old friend, the coal hammer." Four deft blows knocked a stone down to size. His thin wrists were surprisingly strong.

I assumed he was 'Badger' because of his hair. He'd started to grey early, and in photographs in his album of walls – each job recorded with a snap of him proudly standing by his work – you could see the evolution of a streak of grey through the black. By the time I knew him, all through my teenage years, the grey predominated, but a streak of black remained. From my parents' car we'd see him, popping up from a ditch or peering through a gap in a half-mended wall, looking like a rare mammal I might put a tick beside in my Eye Spy book. At the wheel, Dad started singing:

*“Joshua fit the battle of Jericho,
Jericho, Jericho,
Joshua fit the battle of Jericho,
and the walls come tumbling down...”*

I cringed; he always affected a West Indian accent when he sang it. But I loved the bit where he pursed his lips and did an impression of a trumpet solo. If he hadn't been called to the ministry, he'd have been a great jazz trumpeter – so he often told me.

I could just remember the scenes from Berlin in '89 – my parents opened some of Mum's gooseberry wine to celebrate. Before I was born, they'd done missionary work all over Europe, including both West and East Germany. They went to protests, wearing strings of flowers and massive bell-bottomed trousers. In their day, Christians could be hippies too. The house was full of books on liberation theology.

“Dad, Badger doesn't want walls to come tumbling down!”

“That's where you're wrong. Haven't you seen how closely he follows the news about traffic accidents in the dale? Boy racers taking that corner too fast coming into the village. Young farmers driving home drunk, clipping their own gateposts. It's walls falling that keeps him in business.”

Laughing, Mum recited a snatch of poetry: “Of all appalling callings, dry-stone walling’s worst of all!”

I didn’t agree. That summer, I unofficially apprenticed myself to Badger. His rusty pickup would stop by our house every morning and I’d go with him to mend a wall or, sometimes, build from scratch. I learned to dig a trench and lay foundations; to start the lowest courses with the biggest stones; when to lay a course of through-stones to hold the wall together, and how to trickle rubble into the middle as filling; to taper the wall at the correct angle as it rose, and to crown it with coping-stones. I even learned to build on sloping ground, to turn corners, and to neatly end the wall at a gatepost.

“Badger?” I asked, as we sheltered from rain in the pickup. “Do you think of what you do as a... a *calling*?”

He didn’t laugh, just looked down thoughtfully at his corned-beef sandwich.

“Well pet, you could say that. I always thought of it as more of a *finding*. Walling found me, or I found it. I’m a good fit for it. Farmers need walls, and I’m good at building them. I just kind of slotted into place. But some people have to rattle around a bit before they find their place. Some people need to get their rough edges knocked off first.”

“What about if you never find your place?”

“Some never do. And even if you do, it still takes hard work. And time. We put one stone on top of another, but time moves them and lets them settle. It might take years before you find where you’re meant to be.”

I was silent as we coasted down the rain-lashed road towards the village. Eventually Badger asked what I wanted to do when I finished school.

“I’m good at maths. I think I might work for a bank.”

He laughed at that. “I can’t see you sitting behind a perspex screen in the Midland.”

“No, I mean... investment banking. In the City of London.”

“You’ll get a few rough edges knocked off you there.”

I kept in touch with Badger all through uni and afterwards, while I served time at the consultancy firm that eventually brought me a six-figure salary. My tube commute was brightened by rain-speckled postcards in his child-like handwriting: *Fixing an old wall near Hartside this month. Found some lead soldiers inside it, and saw a stoat this morning!*

I married, but career pressures meant we didn’t try for children. It was just as well. Tensions simmered, resentment. Promotions and pay rises came my way but not his. I thought about moving back North. The post that delivered the divorce paperwork also brought the last letter from Badger. *You know I haven’t much, but I’m leaving you my tools. I already gave you everything else you’ll need.*

Building a cairn on Badger’s grave was my idea. Dad wasn’t C of E, of course, but he charmed the vicar and secured permission. The churchyard is sheltered from the wind, but the rain that came sweeping off the fell this morning now makes the stones sparkle in the sun. We get all weathers. Standing by the cairn, I find my footing in the wet grass, and I look up to where a curlew circles overhead, calling bravely. I lean forward and slot the last stone into place.

Dorothy Lawrenson writes poetry and short fiction in English and Scots. She has published in journals including Edinburgh Review, Irish Pages, Oxford Magazine and The Spectator, and in anthologies including A Year of Scottish Poems. She lives in Edinburgh and can be found online at dorothylawrenson.com.