



# Lights Over Sheel

By

Barry Stead

## Flora on the High Moors



Flora stayed up in the warm little cottage watching an old film after her grandmother had gone to bed, and thereby giving Ricky C with the GSOH plenty of time to reply, and herself plenty of self imposed restraint in replying. Finally she hit the road just after midnight, and very carefully at that: the frost was severe.

She set off slowly, and at times when the car turned a corner, the full beam of the headlights shone beyond the road, casting bizarre shadows across the white moors.

Flora slowed down the better to take in the scenery. She had never seen the High Moors like this before and they were eerily beautiful. Behind her the lights of another car bumped over the horizon.

*Damn*, she thought, feeling her privileged isolation violated. She sped up as fast as she dared, feeling the wheels skid slightly as she accelerated. She turned into the skid –it was only a small turn but her nearside front wheel skated over a patch of black ice sending the vehicle twisting, albeit gracefully, into the verge. The engine stalled. *Damn*.

She had come to rest in a passing place, those small lay-bys on single-track roads so common in the highlands that allow for approaching cars to pass each other.

Flora checked the mirror to see where the other car was but there was no gleam of headlights behind her. It must have dropped into a dip in the road. She turned the ignition. All she had to do was reverse carefully. The clutch came up, the tyres caught and the 4x4 jerked backwards into the road, skidding again. Flora slammed the clutch down to disengage while keeping the engine running. A light touch of the brake brought her to a stop then she saw the flash of the headlights. It was as if the car behind her had run over a log in the road so sudden and jerky was its movement. Then it was gone.

*Calm down, Flora. It's probably a musician coming home from a gig up at Mallaig. Yes, Bobby Wilson with his accordion and guitars. Mind you, the headlights were very powerful and Bobby's van is so old it couldn't light up his garage never mind a stretch of road.* Her imagination now took over and she saw a freak with a shotgun emptying the barrel into the windscreen, and worst of all, a mouldy hand raise itself, dank and stinking, to put its rotting flesh on her shoulder

*Christ, Flora, get a grip, girl.*

She let out the clutch and gingerly inched forward. The girl who had driven from Brisbane to Canberra was wishing she had stayed at her grandmother's. Out here she as visible as a bluebottle climbing a whitewashed wall. Slowly she picked up speed. Ahead, the entrance to Glen Gannoch, and the mountains on either side, loomed just out of reach. A brief look in the mirror again confirmed the car had not reduced the distanced between them though that did not make her feel safer. To hear other voices, to prove the world was populated, she turned the radio on: it was still set at her mother's favourite station, playing old rock that was seriously not cool.

The headlights flashed into her car again, searing her eyes and illuminating every detail as if someone had thrown a Very light into the back seat. The radio crackled then died as the light vanished. The car stalled again.

What car has lights like that? Flora turned to look through the back window but saw nothing beyond the colours and stars dancing in front of her hurt eyes. The road was quiet. Literally quiet: her ears picked up no sound, no engine, no footfalls.

When she could see clearly again, when her eyes had adjusted to the dark, she turned the ignition half expecting it not to work. But the engine rasped into life and the radio came on. Listening to herself breathing, she drove forward just waiting for the other car to drive up to her back bumper.

She had done about four hundred yards when another light became visible. It was a single source like a lighthouse, not two headlights, and it was not on the road. Hovering above the moors to her right at what distance she could not tell was a pulsating elliptical glow. In its centre there seemed to be a metallic solidity, and the snow covered moor bloomed with its reflected light.

It was so strong that it cast a shadow across the passenger seat. She could see her silhouette gripping the wheel, she could see her hair peek out from her hat. As she pushed the accelerator toward the floor the light glided northwards. Behind her in the mirror she tracked it as it rushed with uncanny speed to the horizon where it stopped. It just stopped—ignoring all the laws of inertia and conservation of momentum—and hung in the air. Flora flicked her head round to check with her own eyes rather than trust to a reflection. But the glow was till there, pulsing, pulsing. Next slowly it began to move toward her. She spun round to concentrate on the road before her and caught sight of two points of light, small, almost pin pricks, above the dry stone wall on the verge.

*Jesus, what have I seen*, she muttered. *Please, God, let those be the lights of houses.* She checked again and they were gone. So had the light.

Now she noticed the radio was still silent. The car was moving and presumably generating electricity but no moving of the dial or flicking it off and on brought the station back. In fact there were no other stations: the radio had died completely. And suddenly in the emptiness of the moors she was conscious that her breathing had become short and rapid as her hands gripped the wheel with iron tightness.

*Calm down, girl, you've driven this stretch of road dozens of times by yourself since you passed her test, why be panicky now? Because you're alone, it's 12.45 in the morning and a car with blinding headlights is following you. No! No! – there's a helicopter out searching for hikers lost on the moors. Yes, that's it, searching for hikers. Lost hikers.*

She sighed, letting her head fall to the wheel, feeling her heart thump against her breast. *Let's go home.* All she had to do was get to the Saddle, a firm dark outline high ahead, closer but not close enough. Once over it she could see Sheel.

As her foot let the clutch bite, the car inched forward. It had barely moved six inches when it hit something.

There was a dull thump. A scream, thin and shrill, cut through her ears, which whimpered away into a bleating sound. She pressed the brakes. As the car skidded to a halt, a figure, a small shape, darted out of the headlights, vanishing in the dark.

Her first instinct was to get out, to see what she had hit, but her hand hesitated at the handle. Instead, she locked the door. Whoever had gone head to head with her bumper was still, by the sounds of it, hurting. She could still hear the bleating. But it did not come from outside: it was playing inside her head. Flora went rigid at the keening sounds, thinking that she had hit her head. Urgently she felt her skull, shoulders, arms and chest in case there was anything broken but she wasn't reassured. She now didn't care what it was she had hit. *Shut up*, she screamed at herself over the sobbing in her head. Then that too failed as the car pulled forward, slowly at first then gaining speed. She accelerated as fast as she dare, skidding occasionally, and damn it if she hit a wall – she didn't care: she was going to get home.

She eased off the accelerator as the road bent to the left before descending into a hollow. When she reached the bottom her world exploded in a thousand flashbulbs. A clinical white light filled the car, forcing Flora to clap her eyelids tightly shut as she lost control of the car. The engine died.

Seconds later when she opened her eyes the darkness had returned. She hastily shifted into reverse and turned the ignition but the engine did not respond. There was only the click of the key as she repeatedly tried the ignition. Frantically she dived into her pocket for her mobile and found that it too was dead, the light utterly drained.

"Come on," she hissed, switching it on and off, unavailingly. She tried the car's inside light but it too refused to come on. Was the battery drained as well?

A fear, which she felt physically as a spasm, ran through every muscle, throwing her back into the seat. Had her bladder been full it would have been involuntarily emptied. She was shaking now and sweat was beading on her brow. About her the pulsing glow grew, swelling in brightness till the whole of the hollow was like the inside of an arc light. Her eyes stung. Her legs jerked out, flattening her feet against the floor.

Outside on the road two figures, black against the eerie light, appeared.

*Rescue.*

As she raised her head, the blinding light about her seemed to melt away into a summer vision of herself playing as a child by the Gannoch burn. She could smell the heather, feel the heat of the sun on her arms as she jumped up to wave to her parents. When she skipped off into the bracken, the scene gently melted to show herself in her new school uniform, standing by the eaves of Sheel forest after school. She had told her mother she had gone to look for fairies, a strange story for a young girl on the edge of adolescence.

All of these incidents were interspersed with other stills from her life, pictures of her standing alone, waiting with a smile playing on her lips. She saw herself on the eve of going to Australia scrambling down from Slidder point to the edge of the sea loch. She heard the stones crunch under her foot as time suddenly kaleidoscoped to its normal pace.

Then a pure silver whiteness enveloped her and she knew no more.