

THE LOST TRIBE

Ludo Noens

Things they do look awful cold

Hope I die before I get old.

The Who, My Generation (1965)

The stone structure did not look particularly impressive, and if Stan had known that this was all there was to it, he might never have started the long walk over the moorland. But he'd heard about it, even once seen a photograph in a book, and now he was here in Cornwall, and that odd name on the road sign...

Anyway, he'd parked his Audi a little further down the road, on the spot with the dented caravans and two rundown campervans, where the strange people he'd initially taken for gypsies had been loitering. There had been the 'incident' and then he'd carried on down the dirt track leading here, a lengthy walk between heather, ferns, brambles, nettles and cow parsley. It had taken him much longer than expected.



But finally, here it stood, the Mên-an-Tol, a megalithic hotchpotch composed of a couple of lying stones, two skewed menhirs and the celebrated hollow monolith, a broad granite ring standing propped up in the earth.

Megalithic was rather a grandiose term for the grey, moss-covered mass which barely surpassed Stan's navel, but his travel guide proclaimed it to be the legacy of Neolithic man dating back four or five thousand years.

Apparently no one knew what the round hole in the Mên-an-Tol had been for at the time. As with most of these prehistoric structures, archaeologists thought it might have had an astronomical or religious function. Perhaps this had been the site of initiation rites performed by a sun worshipping cult.

The stone formation was a bit of a disappointment, but in normal circumstances Stan would have been reasonably satisfied, more so as the idea of sun worship reminded him of the solar eclipse that had taken place here a

couple of days ago, eclipse which had been fully visible here in Cornwall (or would have been, were it not for the persistent clouds that had spoiled the party). The eclipse was also the reason he had picked South West England for his annual holiday, an idea that clearly had occurred to half the population of Western Europe, to judge by the chaotic traffic jams on motorways and even B-roads.

This was the spot where Stan had hoped to find the peace he'd been searching for so fruitlessly during the last five days. Now he was finally alone in this vast, softly undulating moorland, under a glorious dome of sky packed with grey cumulus clouds, showing here and there a promising chink of blue.

Quite a change from the little grey office of the Turnhout electronics company PVL, where, white shirted and with sweaty armpits, he dutifully strung together his increasingly similar-seeming days into a pension-ready string.

He had expected to see tourists here, cameras at the ready, pulling out their pack lunches around midday, but there was no one to be seen on the entire circle of the horizon. All he could hear were birds chirping, and far in the distance he saw the long, low walls of stacked flat stones, a ramshackle farm, something that looked like a factory chimney, here and there a cottage, but nowhere any sign of life.

The deep stillness should have worked its magic on Stan's spirits, but strangely enough it was only now that he felt really sullen, a little dejected even. He paced around aimlessly for a while, barely looking back at the Neolithic formation. His thoughts kept turning back to the people who had taken up position at the entrance of the site ...

For the fourth or fifth time Stan felt with his left hand in the pocket of his green velvet jacket. *It* was still there. Once again he strolled around a little, until after a while he saw a man coming up his way on the dirt track.

Somewhat uneasy Stan craned his neck. Judging by the man's clothing and age he didn't belong with *them*...

Didn't look like a tourist either. A man of about his own age, in his fifties. A little more hair on the head, but not quite so sprightly. Red sleeveless V-neck woollen jumper over a blue striped shirt. Leptosome build. Probably lived around here. Perhaps a bachelor like himself. Looked like he was walking the dog, but Stan couldn't see a dog. Thumbs in trouser pockets, the man approached the stones and nodded briefly at him.

Rather an awkward situation, all alone here with this fellow. If the man didn't say something soon, Stan would have to save the situation with his own chatter.

'Are you from around here?' he asked straight out.

The man gestured with his chin in a westerly direction.

'Madron.'

Stan knew the village. He'd driven past shortly before.

The other smiled vaguely and seemed otherwise as reserved as he was.

'I didn't know there were still hippies living here,' said Stan quickly. 'At home, in Belgium, you never see them any longer...'

'Hippies?'

Stan nodded in the direction of the entrance to the site and grimaced lopsidedly.

'Oh them,' said the man, 'they're tramps...'

He didn't seem very pleased. Would've been better to start on another topic, Stan thought, this guy probably has no idea what I'm talking about.

'They travel about in their *vans* and stop and spread their mess around wherever it suits them. A nuisance for our farmers...'

'Are you in agriculture?' Stan clutched at the conversation.

'No,' said the man. 'I work in Madron.'

Stan nodded.

'Well, they really reminded me of... Well, those, you know...'

'I *know* what hippies are,' said the other, 'but believe me, they're no hippies, those *punks* you're referring to.'

This rather brusque reply surprised Stan.

'No,' he said hastily. 'Of course. It's just, that long hair, the woolly jackets and jeans and beads and their guitars and... For a moment I felt like I was back...'

'Yep, that's how they look,' the man maintained, 'but they're not hippies. They're troublemakers.'

This is leading us nowhere, thought Stan. He searched for the right words to end the conversation.

'I was there, you know,' the other continued. 'Donkey's years ago, on the Isle of Wight...'

Stan's face registered surprise. He was quite taken aback.

'You mean the big music festival?'

'That's the one,' the man smiled for the first time. He seemed to be enjoying Stan's surprise.

'The Doors, The Who, Joni Mitchell, Jethro Tull, Jimi Hendrix, you name it. I was there for all that. Fantastic time. Five days, five hundred thousand *freaks* in a field, a sea of little white and blue tents, unbelievable sight. As in Woodstock the year before, in the end the latecomers to Wight took down the fences so they could get to the concerts for free. Sometimes it got pretty chaotic you know. Drunken *Angels* swinging cudgels, as in Altamont...'

Stan had clearly misjudged the fellow. The character he'd pictured couldn't have been further from this nostalgic type still 'stuck in the sixties'. Could this man who looked as if he had a dream job on Madron village council ever have been a real hippy? Or was he just one of the thousands of those *plastic hippies*, as they were called by the real drop-outs, the scourge of the psychedelic counterculture at the time?

He began to understand what possessed the old devil to be so critical about those 'new hippies'.

In fact Stan had heard there were hippy-like tribes that drifted around this area. Small communities of them still living in these green regions, trying to be self-sufficient, independent of the economic structures of the *plastic society*. Another ideal from that turbulent times long passed.

But really, in a sense he might not even have guessed himself, that guy was probably right. In today's society surely 'real heroes' were only to be found lying in the churchyard.

Carried along by bittersweet memories from his youth, the man continued excitedly for a while longer, when Stan heard a rustling noise behind him. Without interrupting the man, he shifted to the side and turned his head towards the hollow stone. Only then did he see the girl standing in the round opening of the Mên-an-Tol...

Stan smiled. The fellow wasn't walking his dog, he was with his daughter (or granddaughter?). He didn't know why, but he now really felt sorry for him.

'... We were the terror of the local residents,' he heard the other say. 'A horde of half naked savages with painted faces. *People from a different planet*, the local farmers used to call us...'

Stan's face furrowed once again with concern. The girl was staring at him, motionless. She must have been about five, long reddish hair and a pale freckled face. She was wearing a red and green tartan skirt. He particularly noticed her unusually pale skin. A true Celt, he thought.

Suddenly she leapt into motion, bending forward and creeping quickly and lithely through the hole in the stone. On the other side she scrambled to her feet again, holding the stone wheel with her right hand and lurched back the other way. Where once again she crept through the round opening, quickly and with reptilian flexibility. And again. And again.

And again and again and again...

And then she stopped. She stood motionless by the stone ring and looked at Stan, without panting, with a strange, mocking smile. She was now so pale he really felt sick.

'Isn't your... little girl getting a little too excited?' he stammered, as he continued to stare at the child in fascination.

There was no answer.

Stan felt a cold sensation creep up his spine. He turned his head cautiously. And found he had been talking to thin air. The man beside him had disappeared. Stan turned abruptly towards the path, but there was no one to be seen there either...

But what really shocked him was he noticed that the strange child was still standing by the hollow monolith. He didn't know what to think of all this, didn't dare to take another step forward or back. The longer he continued to stare at the milk white face of the girl, the more familiar it seemed to him, until finally it *fused* with the face of the young woman he'd seen back there – how long ago now? – the one he'd seen at the entrance to the site.

Unthinkingly he felt for his jacket pocket with his left hand again...

... She had separated from the other... hippies and had run with a light step towards him as Stan was about to pass the black guy strumming the guitar, trying to appear as indifferently as possible.

The Hendrix lookalike, a wide red band around his hugely swelling bunch of curls, didn't really pay him any attention either. Stan ignored the conspicuously placed saucer of coins and was about to set the first step on the dirt track, when the young woman unexpectedly stood there in front of him in a cloud of patchouli. With her long white skirt and straight, reddish hair, she had something of an angel about her. Al-though her light blue eyes gave her gaze a soft, ethereal touch, she still radiated a far too human air. Of course her silent but emphatic accusation had only been directed at his unreasonable hostility and neglect of Hendrix's saucer, but her specific appearance made it seem as if...

It had really upset him. A coincidence, of course, but the memories and feelings of guilt they'd awoken in him had abruptly spoilt his holiday.

It wasn't just that the young woman had resembled Lisa; there was also that polychrome gang, exactly like the garish urban hippies Lisa had hung out with back then, when he'd met her at the Antwerp pub, the *Groene Michel*.

He now realised that the gnawing sympathy he'd felt for the lonely walker had in fact just been self-reproach: he had really only been plastic himself during that short period. But at least he hadn't started out with any illusions.

It had also confused him later how seriously Lisa had continued to take their relationship. Of course, he'd loved her, but had he ever had an alternative? His father would certainly have killed him if he'd dropped out of business school...

Stan almost jumped out of his skin. He was still standing face to face with the girl by the hollow stone. And God help him, at the very moment he thought of his father her lips began to move. The quick, double movement without audible sound was the most hallucinatory thing he'd experienced here so far. Was he dreaming or was that wafting patchouli from back there still stuck in his brain? He couldn't have misunderstood. She'd 'said' *daddy...*

He took a hesitant step forward, and at the same moment she jumped, more than crawled, through the hole... and disappeared.

...When Stan finally arrived back at the site entrance he looked at his Swatch: it was a quarter to five. He had no idea where all that time had gone. One thing was clear and unmistakable: here, on the edge of the road to Madron, stood an old caravan, two rickety campervans and his own metallic Audi – he could see them with his own eyes. But there was no sign of life whatsoever.

This time when he put his left hand into his jacket pocket, he did it absent-mindedly and froze when he felt *it* again under his fingers...

... She'd moved as if to block his way and although it occurred to Stan that her gaze and attitude betrayed a subtle, troubling significance which couldn't possibly be connected with a few petty coins, he tried desperately

to put that kind of spin on it. He hastily fished out a couple of coins and threw them into the saucer. Hendrix laughed, showing his white teeth and nodded theatrically, without interrupting his playing. Love is all around, Stan read quickly on the body of his worm-eaten guitar. The statement was scratched into it in red ink.

It had happened quickly. Just very briefly, in spite of everything, he'd thought it was a crude attempt to pick his pocket. In the blink of an eye her hand disappeared into the left pocket of his jacket and hastily withdrew. Mechanically he pressed his own hand against the mobile in his right pocket and stepped back, uncomprehending.

When she only answered his surprised look with a conspiratorial smile, he'd abruptly turned away and walked hurriedly on in the direction of the Neolithic structure...

Only now, he decided to look at what the playful young woman had so secretly stashed in his pocket. His right hand fished out a piece of foil... with, God help him, an orange pill inside. A tiny ball of nothing, too small for chewing gum or even a mint, but somehow the silliness of it brought no sense of relief. Quite the opposite.

He stuck the unsightly pea automatically back in his pocket and walked over to his car. This had all taken much too long. He'd go back to Madron, look for a B&B and go to sleep. Tomorrow he'd be sure to find a ridiculously obvious explanation for all this.

But his Audi wouldn't start, despite his repeatedly turning the key. A damned creepy feeling came over him of being held in a nasty, persistent dream, as if he were stomping his way through loose desert sand, unable to make any real progress. He beat his fist hard against the steering wheel, pulled a tearful grimace and stepped wearily back out of the car...

There was a silver lining to his cloud. The first car that came along in the direction of Madron picked him up, although he'd had to wait a good half hour by the godforsaken road.

It was a smart-looking Saab with a middle-aged guy at the wheel. The man, a well dressed cuddly chap confidently chewing on a torpedo of a cigar, looked sideways at Stan, who himself looked terribly confused in a way that the other couldn't have failed to notice.

'From Belgium, are you? That was your car at the side of the road wasn't it?' he asked, as Stan rubbed his eyes convulsively.

'Couldn't get it to start,' he sighed. 'I don't understand it. Know where I can find a garage in Madron?'

'That's where I'm heading,' said the other.

'Might have been a dirty trick by those caravan folk, I don't know...'

The cigar kept his eyes on the road.

'Who do you mean?'

'Those hippies...'

There was a short, uncomfortable silence. Then the other said,

'I've lived in this area nineteen years, but I've never seen hippies pass through here. You see plenty of those drifters around Glastonbury and Tintagel, if that's what you mean...'

'This afternoon they were settled at the entrance to the Neolithic site,' said Stan. 'Obviously looking to earn a bit off the passing tourists. You saw their campervans, didn't you?'

The cigar turned briefly to give Stan a searching look before turning back to the road.

'Those wrecks have been rusting away there for years...'

Another unpleasant silence, emphasised by the soft hum of the Saab. Eventually Stan sighed and reached for his forehead.

'Were you at the Mên-an-Tol?' the cigar asked suddenly. It seemed to Stan that his abrupt gesture had provoked the question. He didn't answer, but looked at the other expectantly.

'It's not the first time odd things have happened there...'

His laugh seemed as unnatural to Stan as everything he'd experienced that afternoon.

This guy had no sense of humour whatsoever, he thought, you could see that right away from his granite manager head. What was that creaking laugh supposed to mean, then?

He balked at the idea of asking for an explanation though.

'You haven't been *Pisky-led* have you?' the other chuckled and looked quickly at him. Stan didn't respond.

'You don't know the Piskies? The *Little People of Peace*, we call them. An invisible folk living in unspoilt nature spots. They can make terrible fools of people who bother them. They get them lost or scare them some other way...'

Stan still didn't respond. The cigar looked at him sideways again.

'It's just Celtic superstition,' he continued, more seriously now, as if he was really concerned about Stan.

'... Probably something to do with the Scottish Picts who came down here in the past.'

A manager with a schoolteacher father, Stan thought sullenly.

'They also say if you crawl through the hole of that hollow stone over there you end up in the Land of Eternal Youth...'

'Let's talk about something else,' said Stan.

'... A sort of fourth dimension, where time passes slower than here. There are a good many rumours about kidnappings doing the rounds...'

'Would you drop me off here?' Stan said suddenly.

The Saab slowed abruptly.

'We'll be in Madron in just a few minutes you know.'

'Would you please stop here, sir!'...

The flashy vehicle tore away and Stan remained behind on the side of the road. He gazed in the direction of Madron for a moment, then set off resolutely back in the opposite direction.

An hour or an age later he was back at the Mên-an-Tol. He sat down next to the hollow monolith and glanced surreptitiously through the hole. At eye level of course he saw nothing other than the same short green grass that grew everywhere here. He ground his teeth and shook his head.

Suddenly, as if to pre-empt interfering thoughts, he bent down and quickly crawled through the round opening...

On the other side he straightened up and brushed off his trousers, looking around, heart thumping. Not that he'd expected anything special, but if anyone had seen him do that...

There was no one around and the gently undulating heath and clouded sky were still there just as before. He turned to one of the two short menhirs that flanked the round monolith in a straight line along its axis, and sat down with his back against the rock. Through the round hole he now looked out directly at the second, slightly skewed, sunken stone.

And he thought of the pale little girl...

... How could so many specific peculiarities of his past life suddenly crop up and somehow concentrate themselves in this place? Associated memories activated by a coincidence of location.

They all had something to do with Lisa, the other-worldly 'flower girl' he'd lost sight of ages ago.

Lisa, eighteen years old, initially chasing after the students of May 1968 in their call for 'reformation of their formation', had soon found a more extreme outlet for her existential doubts. From one day to the next she'd abandoned her studies in Leuven and had fallen under the spell of the Californian psychedelic wave of the day.

Her new idol had been Timothy Leary, the American LSD prophet who encouraged kids fed up with authority to turn their backs on corrupt consumer's society. He remembered how Lisa had always walked around with a copy of Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* and sang the praises of psilocybin, mescaline and other *trips*. It would open up a new world to Stan if he just gave it a try. They'd do it together, walking through timeless reality hand in hand, a shimmering universe full of sparkling life and light. Just a step from God's back garden. From there he'd see for himself how deluded, foolish and short-sighted existing social structures were...

But he had grown afraid of her increasingly transparent appearance and that of her loopy friends. No, they'd never been plastic, but their radical worldview was completely irreconcilable with the aspirations of society's leaders.

Stan too had labelled their behaviour an 'escape from reality for sensitive kids who can't cope with the demands of everyday life,' and his 'more realistic' perspective enabled him to predict that their disruptive subversiveness would be short-lived.

The ten thousand plastics – himself included – had no difficulty of getting back onto safe tracks a short time later. Fun times, but all that fuss about 'consciousness expansion' had never really e.

What had happened to the others? The handful of uncompromising *mind trippers* who had already gone far too far beyond their own boundaries ever to return?

He didn't know what had happened to Lisa. He had left her when it became clear to him that she was resolutely sawing off the branch she was sitting on. In the rapidly rising tyranny of economism, with newsreaders gradually beginning to take on the role of business accountants and ministerial spokesmen, there could be no place for someone like her.

Later, in the *Groene Michel*, he learnt that Lisa had left that summer for the Isle of Wight music festival along with her likeminded *acidheads*. They'd not been seen in the legendary Antwerp pub since.

Stan became aware that he'd been fiddling with the orange pill in his jacket pocket for some time now. Of course he knew what it was; he'd known since...

What if after the festival Lisa had set out from the Isle of Wight to travel further west with her tribe? To Avalon, Tír na nÓg, the mystic land of fairies and spirits, a parallel dimension where time passed differently. The Celtic afterlife.

Lisa had always lived in that sphere; it fitted completely with her unstable, irrational universe. She and her pale crew were undoubtedly loopy, but they weren't stupid. They must have known all the time that people of their sort would be declared outlaws.

If some day they'd heard of the legend of the Mên-an-Tol...

Could all that psychoactive junk and their naïve flirting with esoteric doctrines have sent them so crazy that they had believed that nonsense?...

How many tens of thousands of tourists must have crept through that hole, thought Stan, as he stared at it vacantly.

Now he could really feel himself becoming depressed, stricken with remorse and regret, hounded by horrible memories that had become all too vivid. And gradually he was filled with the unpleasant feeling that long ago he'd turned down a blind alley; it hadn't really been his choice; someone had given him a push. All his life since, he'd played by other people's rules. Who was it that had actually decided that the path he'd taken was the only way? The supposed dividing line between reality and 'fantasy' hadn't been drawn by *him* in any case...

And at that moment, by the ancient, moss-covered stone, he vaguely understood the meaning of all this. Suddenly, again as if to pre-empt interfering thoughts, Stan fished the orange pill out of his pocket and swallowed it down quickly.

First there was rising panic, the realisation that his impulsive action was irrevocable.

And what if something were to happen to me?

But gradually a crawling sensation began, and everything, even the massive block of rock he was leaning against, seemed to come alive. Surprised, he looked down: swirling flames, of all things, began to spatter out from his stomach, and when he raised his eyes again and turned his gaze to the vast, undulating moorland, it seemed as if the landscape really was heaving like

the waves of a happy, playful turquoise sea and he was seeing the world for the very first time...

The pores of his skin soaked up the reanimated residues of sacred acts once performed on this spot, and in a moment of euphoric revelation, the central piece of the puzzle seemed to fall into place. Of course, he thought. Of course. The mother of all subversiveness. *The truth that sets you free...*

Filled with a momentary, unprecedented serenity, he continued to stare through the hole in the Mên-an-Tol, the Neolithic ring through which tens of thousands of tourists had crawled before him without finding anything important on the other side.

It now seemed to him as if he had struggled through such a ring thousands of times before, always with the same task on the other side. But every time, somewhere in the early beginning of the undertaking, much, much earlier than he had initially thought, he had become entangled in the web of the stale old Game, the Game that had already existed hundreds of thousands of years before this prehistoric site had been erected. And he would have had to keep on dancing until the end, to the sinister beat of Something or Someone whose hidden interests could not be discerned...

Suddenly in the round frame of the stone he again saw the face of the very pale little girl, who no longer laughed mockingly, but winked invitingly, and from her light pink little hand wafted the kaleidoscopic sparkle of transparent mother of pearl, with the sweet promise of a virgin, innocent New Beginning.

He straightened up, hurriedly now, then stooped down, without looking around, and for the second time he stuck his head through the hole...
