

## DOUR

The first time I mynd on seein North Gellan in the pairish o Coull, I wad hae bin five year auld. Ma grannie, Lizzie, winted tae veesit her cousin Peter Middleton, the fairmer o the placie. We sat aff frae hame on a Sunday efterneen at the back eyn o October fin the birks at the roadsides war clouds o hingin yalla. Restless birdies war flichterin up frae the trees in black bourichies, like swarms o bees ettlin tae flee awa frae the cauld and the shortenin days o a North East Winter, an blaik clouds scudded ben the lift like flocks o driven yowes.

As we turned roon by the Loch o Abyne, far the wids war dreepin dreich an sterk an chitterin, faither cam oot wi a twa, three, bars o poetry. Whyles he fussled, whyles he recited, fyles he telt ye stories o langsyne o ancestors an the like, fur he'd a great notion o history ma faither, tho the antrin leaf frae his buik o local lear wis a thocht agley. It wis years later that I fun oot that Rob Roy's cave in the Burn o Vat, far he tuik me aften an telt me the great Heilan cateran used it fur a hideyhole ....wis actually the hideyhole o anither McGregor cateran aathegither, a chiel caad Gilderoy. Bit he wis as nesty an bluidthirsty a breet as Rob Roy iver wis. Gilderoy herriet Cromar frae the weet, dreepin waas o his cave at will, an on a day o feast an celebration in the district, fin a local fairmer wis merryin his sweethairt, he rade oot wis his rag-tag o reivers tae spulzie the place.

Onywe, they catched him at the hinnereyn, an raxxed his theivin thrapple fur him doon in Embro in 1658. I wis that teen wi Rob Roy fin I wis a littlin, haein stood, as I supposed in his verra ain cave, an breathed his verra ain air, that I deaved faither till he made me a timmer claymore an targ. Wi this I wad terrorise the hale o the street at hame, tho neen o the

neebors' bairns kent twa wirds o the oaths that cam ooto ma moo, they bein English spukken an my leid bein Doric. And this, I expeck wis jist as weel, fur they war fell genteel, an wad hae bin horrifeed that a bairn cud ken sic coorse spikks. Bit I hae steppit aside frae the main current o the story, the veesit tae North Gellan....

We turned richt bi the Abyne-Tarlan crossroads, an the dyke that faither sat on as a bairn, waggin his haun wi the lave o the clachan, as his cousins merched aff tae the Great War, an along the side o Abyne Castle, wi the the reefs o the Mains fairm, nestled in the blaik, teem rigs, that war fullin wi blawn beech leaves. 'I wis born there, lassie', ma faither telt me. 'An on that very nicht in December, there wis an almichty storm. There wis drivin rain an thunner an lichtenin, sheet efter sheet o't lichtin up the hills. Man, it wis as bricht as daylight ower Mortlach, wi the storm ragin at its heicht, an booin the beech trees like they war strae, an fit tae crack! Weel, ma mither wis sittin sucklin me at her breist bi the fire, rowed up in a shawlie, fin there wis ae great knell, an a streak o lichtenin come doon the lum, an jist missed the baith o's bi a fuser! Ma mither wis reeted tae the ingle, fair terrifeed, grippin me ticht till her, ye ken, an the lichtenin struck the door an vanished. Aabody roon aboot said it wis sent as a sign.'

'A sign o fit, da?' I speired, ma een roon as twa ashets.

'A sign that we'll be late fur wir fly cup if yer faither disna stop bletherin an drive faister' quo ma mither as doonpitten as a weet dishclood on a pluffert o stoor. We held up the road a bittie farrer, bit faither cudna help himsel, fur ilkie park held a story, an the car slawed doon again. 'Thon park tae the left's far we set fire tae the cuddy,' quo he. I wis fair dumfounert, imaginin a cuddy up tae its oxters in kinnlin, a cuddy bonfire. 'Ay, weel, the tinks eesed tae graze their shelts on oor crafties grun at the time o the Games,' cairriet on the burner-o-cuddies.

‘An as aften as no, they widna pye. Sae ma faither jist keepit a cuddy back, fin they gied awa, as lawful dues fur the girse their beasts hid etten.’

‘Quite richt ana,’ cuttit in ma grannie.

‘Onywe,’ faither continued, warmin tae the story, ‘This particular cuddy wadna boo nor bend. It wadna move wan fit. I laid till it’s dowp wi a birk-branch, bit it wis a dashed thrawn cuddy yon een, a richt coorse, perverse kinno a cuddy wi a mynd o its ain. Weel. I wisna gaun tae let a cuddy get the better o me, wis I noo?’

‘Fit did ye dee, da?’ I speired.

‘I cuttit a buss o jobby gorse and stappit it up aneth its tail. Weel it didna like yon, the cuddy, it wis sair jobbit. An the sairer it wis jobbit, the harder it pulled doon its tail, an drave the stobs farrer inno its dowp. Bit it wis a thrawn cuddy ye see, an neen ower bricht, sae still it didna shift. *‘Ye’ll nae get the better o me, ma lad,’* sez I, an syne I gaithered kinnlin frae the wids, biggit a wee pile o’t under the hairy kyte o the cuddy, an lichtit it. It tuik aff like the hemmers o Hell, an didna stop rinnin till it reached the ither side o Tarland.’

‘Div ye think we micht ging a bittie faister?’ complained ma mither.

Several sharnie parks later, we war twa fairms awa frae North Gellan. ‘At last!’ sighed ma mither. Bit faither wisna tae be short cheenged o his memories. ‘Luik yonner!’ he cried, ower the Lochnagar side o the roadie. ‘Yon’s far yer aunt at Ballater near got her hat shot aff.’

Ma mither groaned. We heard foo ma auntie Nell hid come doon tae bide a holiday wi a new merriet cousin fa’d wad a Tarlan fairmer. The cousin wis cairryin twins at the time. Fin Nell steppit up tae the fairm, her cousin grabbit her airm an the trailed the fleggitt lassie intae the barn. ‘He’s hame frae the pub

fechtin foo,' she telt ma auntie Nell. 'We'll jist bide in the barn till the drams weir aff him. Whyles, he offers tae sheet me. It's jist his wye. Ye widna get a better lad, sober'.

Auntie Nell niver bedd lang enough tae takk her hat aff, an didna stop rinnin till she wun hame tae Ballater. Strangely eneuch, her cousin hid a lang, an presumably eventful, merriege, fur as aabody in the car relected, *ye wadna hae gotten a better lad sober*. And syne, we'd reached the fit of the parks o North Gellan.

Auld Peter Middleton, the fairmer, was my faither's uncle, as weel as sib tae ma grannie, Lizzie, on ma mither's side, fur we war aa close in bluid in oor faimly. Afore he drave up the roadie, far nicht wis creepin in frae the muirs like a saft, dusky, plaidie, slidderin ower the dykes wi lang, oorie shaddas, my da badd me takk a lang luik o the parks that lay on either side, fur they war, he telt me, far aa ower fowk hid come ooto, time ooto mynd. An mair, that the auncient Druid circle o Tomnaverie guairded yon parks, nae a steen's throw awaa frae the fairm, and that maist o oor seed war beeriet nearhaun, bi the ruined castle o Coull, far a ghaistly bell is heard tae ring fin a Durward dees. '*They come frae the grun o Coull, they ging back tilt,*' ma faither telt me. I wis catched an enthralled bi the things he said o yon place, fur it gid me an anchor, a sense o place, that ither littlins niver hae. 'And mebbe noo, we'll get a fly cup,' gurred ma mither. 'Yer uncle Peter'll be thinkin we've come fur wir tea if ye dinna gee yersel.'

'Luik, luik grannie!' I cried tae the auld wummin sittin in the front passenger seat, as befitted an elder o the tribe. "The hill's are fite! There's sna on the hills, grannie!"

'Fin yon fite Mounth frae sna be clear,  
The day o doom is drawin near,' quo grannie, mysteriously.  
An sae I hid tae be telt that the Fite Mounth wis Lochnagar,

an that He ay cairriet a wee pucklie snaa at His bosie, an that if iver His bosie tint the snaa, the warld wid come tae an eyn.

Faither, wad niver be bettered tho, in the maitter o stories.

‘Fin Morven hill his got a tap

Then aa Cromar’ll hae a drap,’ quo faither.

‘A drap o fit, da?’ I speired, thinkin o the fusky that gart Auntie Nell’s cousin’s man tae sheet fowk. I wis hopin that the fowk at North Gellan hidna teen a drap o fusky, an that they widna offer tae sheet *us*.

‘A drap o rain, ma quine,’ said faither. ‘Fin Morven’s got a cloud aroon it, ye ken it’s gaun tae rain.’

‘Ay ye dinna need a weather forecast wi yer grannie an yer da in the car;’ quo mither soorly.

An sae, we drave inno o the coort o North Gellan, seed bed o ma forebears, an parked the car. A heich, spare chiel strade oot tae greet us. He wid hae bin echtly year auld if he hid bin a day, bit he wis as fit as a man thirty year younger. He helpit my grannie ooto the car, fur she wis hippit wi sittin an fell rheumatically, an syne he bosied her, an kittled her like he’d bin a halflin. Ma grannie leuch. ‘Man Peter, it’s a real treat tae see ye,’ she keckled. I glowered at the auld man frae aneth ma broos. I didna like strange mannies kittlin my grannie.

Inbye the kitchie it wis derk, an they hidna yet lichtit the lamps. Aa the licht that there wis cam frae the fire that spat and flichtered up the lum, the reid hairt o the room. Roon the fire wis a muckle blaik range, wi a swey an a kettle an pots an pans. Auld Peter Middleton, fairmer o the place dowpit doon bi the ingle, fyle his dother in law made the fly.

Kennin that the arrival o a fly betokened the stert o a lang langamachie o news, I hunkered doon on a wee cheer aside the windae, catchin the last o the dwinin daylight, an fished in ma pooch fur the back o an envelope. I ay cairriet a bittie paper in

ma pooch tae draa on. I likit draain. Fin I wis draain I wis quate, tint tae the warld an aathin it't. I didna spik, I didna think, I didna barely move, forebye's the neive that held the pencil, an in yon neive an throw it flowed a line, that micht be a stag, or a hoosie, or fowk, jist fitiver tuik my fancy. An fin I wis biggin yon stag, or hoosie, or body, I micht hae bin Merlin, I felt that pouerfu, takkin a bare bit paper an fullin't wi picturs. Ither bairns cud sclimm trees or fecht or yowl or sing daft wee tunes an lowp in an ooto skippin towes. Bit I drew, an I likit it. It gart me feel like God creatin Adam. Efter aa, aa He'd hid tae wirk wi wis a daud o clay frae the grun. I likit clay, tee. I aften plytered about wi dubs. I likit the touch o them, the feel o the blaik soss, kirnin wi't, sclappin't onno waas, spirkin it onno leaves, feelin its weetness, enjoyin its blaikness, clartin ma paws till they war yirdit.

'I'll buy ye a bonnie dallie,' mither eence said.

'I dinna wint a bonnie dallie,' I telt her.

'No I dinna suppose ye div. Ye'd raither makk a clart an a sottar o yersel,' she girmed. Sae I sat in the neuk o the windae at North Gellan yon derk efterneen, an I drew. It wis fit keepit me happy.

Efter a whylie, I heard ma grannie say tae Auld Peter, 'Fit think ye o ma gran'dother, Peter? Fit think ye o the quinie there?'

I wis curious tae hear fit the auld man wid say about me. I stappit ma draain inno ma pooch, faulded ma hauns on ma lap, an tuik a lang luik o him. I dinna mind muckle o the lave o the fowk we met yon day, bit I mynd on Auld Peter. Oh ay, I mynd on him. He wis the maister o the place, fur aa his age, like a muckle black wyver cockin in its wab bi the ingle.

He wis weirin a fite sark wi nae collar, galluses, an tackety buits. There wis a scrapin o fite stibble ower his chin. His neb

wis hooked like an erne's beak, his chooks sunken in roon his moo, like a skull, covered wi a thin happen o skin. There wis a coo's lick o fite hair stukken tae the reef o his heid, like peer thatchin on a ruined craftie. His een war sherp an shrewd, like a ratten's een. He micht hae bin handsome fin he wis young. He wid hae bin black heidit. Aa oor fowk war black heidit. Bit noo, he sat in the neuk o the fire, like a scaffold, braid showder beens powkin up the sark, that hid lost the claddin o muscle and flesh. Noo, he wis aa girssle, like a dried up stick o chucken.

He didna answer ma grannie richt aff. He ran his een doon me, like ye'd dee at the mart examinin a stot. Syne, he hoched. Ye cud see his thrapple wirkin up a gobban o glut. He fulled his moo wi spittle, pyochered an spat a gob o slivvers straicht inno the reid hairt o the fire. The spit landed on a stick. It birssled an hissed an slid doon the stick inno the flames.

'She's a dour bitch, that's fit I think o her,' said the auld man forcefully. 'She's nae spoken twa wirds since she's set fit in ower my hoose. I tell ye this,' the auld bodach continued, 'Nae man'll sikk her. She'll dee an auld maid. A dour bitch, that's fit I think o her.' If I wis dour afore yon, I wis ten times dourer efter.

'Peter, Peter,' leuch ma grannie, 'yer a terrible chiel!'

Weel, Auld Peter Middleton wis wrang. Nae lang efter ma fifteenth birthday, I hid ma first kiss frae ma first luv, bi the side o the Tarlan burn, jist roon the side o the McRobert Haa, wi the fiddlers playin a slow air, like they'd bin pyed tae dee it. An aa the stars looked doon frae the tap o Morven, an witnessed it. I learned yon nicht that twa braid showders war made for better things than haimmerin nails inno fence posts. They war the richt heicht an shape fur a lassie tae twine her twa fite airms aroon. An I learned, tee, that a moo that cud spit an

sweir an brag, cud saften, tee, fin it jyned wi a lassie's lips, saften an sweeten, like the lion on the green seerip tin. Fit div ye think o that, Auld Peter?

A puckle years efter, I merriet a Tarlan loon. Three o oor fower bairns war christened at Tarland kirk, the watter o the Tarlan burn spirkit ontae their curly heids as the meenister gied them their names and a blessin afore the congregation o the Howe. Fit div ye think o that, Auld Peter?

I *can* be dour, whyles. It's a gey peer pianie that jist plays eichtsoms reels. Ye like the derk tunes anna, tae rugg at the hairt strings....Bit wi can discuss that side o his prophesy fin we foregaiter, in the fullness o time. I'm booked in three lairs ben frae him, in the kirkyaird o Coull. I beeriet ma faither there, ma mither tee, tho baith o them hid specifically socht ither destinations.

'I've a notion tae hae ma aisse scattered ower the Shanval,' ma faither eence telt me. 'I'm nae religious, as ye ken'.

Noo, this wis a muckle black lee, fur I niver kent onybody mair religious than ma faither. Like masel, he worshipped Lochnagar, an grew dowie an doonhairtit if he spent ower lang frae the Dee. A theologian chiel eence addreesed puckles o letters tae me, tae try tae ferret oot fit my religious inclinations micht be. Efter a twa, three letters cheenged hauns, he screived in exasperation '***Yer naethin bit a Pantheist!***' like a Pantheist wis something orra ye scrapit aff yer buit.

Pantheist or fitiver, faither winted tae be flang tae the wins o Glen Gairn. I think he eence coortit a lassie, there. He wis byordnar fond o the place. Bit as I wis heid o the hoose then, staunin in fur a brither fa sud hae haen chairge o the kistin in the auld Scots wye, I got aathing ma ain wye. An my wye lay bi Coull.

It wis roon about Yule, fin I beeriet him there. The

gravedigger wis a secunt cousin. He hid a terrible tcyaaave wi the grun, fur it wis rock hard, an mowdies hid caad up wee humphs an knowes aa ower the girse. As he turned ower the mools wi his spadd, he telt me that I cud leave the kirkyaird cheerie. ‘Yer faither winna be lang his leen. His cousin ower the road’s near eichty, wi a terrible hoast’ he telt me. ‘I’m expeekin tae beery her in the New Year, aboot sax ben frae himsel.’

Doon they gied, the mortal remains, in the lea o Tomnaverie. The speerit of coorse, is likely bidin aboot the Shenvhal. Bit as the gravedigger said, ‘They ay come hame the fowk frae the Howe, at the hinnereyn.’

Mither hid a notion tae be scattered doon the Dee at the Auld Line in Ballater. I plantit her in Coull, tee. It wis the only time she niver argyed back. Ooto faither’s siller, I ordered the Tarland steenmason tae set up a heidsteen o granite, wi their names on’t. ‘I dinna wint a steen,’ faither eence said. ‘They’re a damnt waste o siller.’

Bit ae day, my name’ll be on it tee, an I like aathing bocht an pyed fur. I niver as much as buy a washin machine on the Never Never, let aleen a heidsteen. Sae noo, I ain a braw heidsteen as weel as sax fit o Deeside. Nae as much as the laird o Invercauld, an I dareasay the view winna be near as gran, bit I *div* ain it, an I’ll be bidin in’t a gey lang time, eternity likely, unless some vratch o an archaeologist howks me up.

An then, Auld Peter, dour or no, ye’ll hae tae pit up wi me. Fur I winna be flittin again!

**Sheena Blackhall**