

Chapter 1

Mick

O God, he's back.

There's his nailed boots on the back step an the clink of the milk pail on the door. He'll go through to the pantry an tip the milk into the cooler an swirl the pail under the cold tap an then he'll be through here. Jesus God. Those hands. Fingers like cow teats but cracked an calloused an stronger than a vice. Can lift a sack of corn with one hand an prise my mouth open without strainin'. O God help me. He's kickin' the mud off his boots at the door. I'll have to get out but it's too sore, the twine round ma wrists. Can't pull it. Can't stand the pain. Skin's rubbed through tryin' to work loose from the lavvy seat. One time I was tied to a chair through there an shat myself when he squeezed ma lips with pliers.

'Breathe through your nose, you wee bastard,' he shouted, 'How many times have I told you. You look so glaikit with your mouth hangin' open.'

Wish I could run, run out of the yard, through the trees. What's the use, though? Just be caught again an whipped with that 'lectric cable.

Jesus, there he's in the pantry. He'll be here in a minute. God help me. Please, please, please, take me away. Mustn't show I'm afraid, though. Grip ma teeth together an stare at the floor. He goes in a right rage when you show you're afraid or if you plead with him. When he slaps your face it's like a hot iron on your skull, like you were branded like a beast.

An she's worse. Tied to ma chair in the kitchen, she cuddled me into her chest.

'Poor wee bairn,' she said, 'Poor wee bairn's no mammy nor daddy.'

Can smell her sweat and fag smoke and clothes not washed while he pulled my head back by the hair an spooned cauld porridge down ma throat.

'Poor wee bairn. Mammy's a whore and daddy's a drunk. Poor wee bairn.'

Times she tries to be nice too. Smiles and leaves a chocolate in front of me and then he says I stole it.

Wish I could drown her. Fling her in the sheep dip and keep her head under till the bubbles stop.

There's the pail washed. Any minute now.

* * *

'I'll have to take my wellingtons today. I'm going to visit the Munros' farm. Unannounced.'

George Buchanan, Children's Officer, winds his watch and slips it into his waistcoat pocket. His wife clears the breakfast table behind him as he folds his napkin neatly and lays it on the table.

'A surprise visit? They might not be there.'

'I don't think they leave the place very often.'

'The back of beyond.'

'Yes. A bit remote. I'm not altogether happy about the placement of the boy. There's something about the couple. A bit too keen to please, obsequious, as if they are hiding something. Still, they promised to look after him so I gave them the benefit of the doubt. I hope I was not mistaken again.'

'I don't know how they scratch a living out of that place.'

'Poor, sour land right enough, covered in rashes. Milk cows skeletally thin, flanks caked with dung. A bad sign. Yet the pigs seem to thrive. Now that's a puzzle, my dear, a puzzle.'

'Probably likes bacon. You'll be back for dinner?'

‘As long as I don’t meet a catastrophe and have to remove the boy.’

He brushes the crumbs from his tweed trousers, pats his pocket to ensure that his pipe and tobacco have been remembered and goes through to the hall. He examines his reflection in the mirror of the hall-stand and smooths down a stray lock of silver hair, hauls on his ex-army waterproof coat and picks up his wellingtons.

‘Bye, dear. Back for dinner.’

A tall man, he stoops as he passes under the lintel.

*

*

*

Ma pal ran away. Not from here like, from the orphanage. They found him frosted to the leaves in a wood. Musta got lost. He was runnin’ home to his Ma in the city.

The cleek on the door clicks an he stands over me. There’s cow-dung on his boots an a splash o’ milk. Don’t look up. Guts are dropping into ma arse and ma heart is jumpin’ about like mad. Grip ma fists tight, waiting for the blow.

‘Where’s Betsy?’ he says.

I shake ma head.

‘Stupid wee bastard. You never know anything.’

An’ he leaves. God answered me. Stop shaking for Christ sake. It’s hard to relax, though, when you’re bent double with your hands and legs tied to the seat. At least I can pee without it spillin’ over the chair. Last time I was tied in the kitchen he left me in ma own pee an shit till it burnt ma skin. She made him let me off ‘cos she couldn’t stand the smell.

How could he not see, the inspector, see what they’re like? They put on a great show. All smiles an ‘sir’. Wash the cups an’ make scones an wash theirselves. Bastards. You want to tell him, It’s fair burstin’ out of you but you hold it in.

‘One fucken word out of you and I’ll whip the skin off your back.’

He would too. Even when the inspector talks to you outside you say nothin’. We all know that. Don’t say a word. Cause trouble and it’s all your fault. Can’t trust any of them. Inspector has kind eyes an quiet voice an smells a pipe smoke but tell him an they’ll deny it all an flog you after till you pass out. You’re in a pit with a pack of wolves, boy. Tongues out over the fangs, slaverin’, round an round, watching you, waiting for the right time. Now an again one races at you, snaps at your leg, tears at the skin an runs away. One day it’ll be your throat.

Davey escaped. No fear, Davey. Used to steal food in the home for the rest of us. Always getting the strap for that an for speaking back an for not learning the psalms. Had his head shaved for ringworm but there was no ringworm there. They knew that fine. If you pee’d the bed you had to wash your own sheets with a sign on your back an they made Davey wash his when they were dry. One night after tea they loaded some of the boys into a car an drove round the country tryin’ to get folk to take them in. Davey was the last to go. Farm folk could see the anger in him, the way he looked sideways at you with slit eyes like a bad dog.

‘Betsy,’ Munro shouts, ‘where the hell are you?’

Christ he’s in a bad temper.

‘Am in the calf house, you dope. Mucking them out. I told you.’

‘Go in there and louse that boy and get him to do it.’

Relax. Means he’s not coming.

‘Louse him yourself you lazy bastard.’

God, is he coming after all ?

‘I’m taking the cows out to the stubble.’

‘Excuses, excuses. I’ll do it after.’

Ma arse is sore, tied in the same place.

Davey was like a bad dog. He had that look. The folk he went to weren't much better than these. Said he was lazy. Hauled him on a pulley in the barn and let the rope go. Knocked all the breath outa him. They sent him back to the home. He grinned as he came in the door.

Some poor souls in there. Mind one bangin' his head on the wall at night till he fell asleep, Thud, thud, thud. You prayed for it to stop. Another sucked his thumb even after they smeared it with mustard and dipped it in carbolic. He never spoke that one.

'Christ, Betsy !' he shouts, 'It's the Officer ! His car's at the road end. Get that kid loused and dressed. Fuck's sake, Betsy. He never said he was coming. Hurry for God's sake. Louse the kid !'

She barges in with a knife in her hand. Going to cut ma throat. Jump back an yell but no she's gonna cut the twine. Christ the twine cuts into ma skin. Knife's blunt.

'It's alright. I'm just cutting you loose.'

Her fingers tremble in the rush. I can see down her front as she bends. Two big udders, wrinkled and white.

'Now get up the stair and put on clean clothes. Hurry up for God's sake and don't come down till you're called.'

Legs are all wobbly trying to climb the stair. Wood of the steps is warm after the cold floor. Can hardly breathe when I reach the loft. No strength left. Sit on the mattress for a minute. Loft's a safe place usually cos they don't come up here. You can hear everything going on below through the bare boards, what they say about you and what they're going to say to the Inspector.

They'll call me down in a minute to speak to him. Maybe I'll tell him the truth, just what they're like, and he'll take me away in the car. Maybe he'd believe me. He took me away from the last place but then the man was dying of a chest thing. Wife cried when the inspector took me away but he could see for himself it was hopeless. Maybe he'll see this

time, see through the lies an wheedlin'. But don't be so stupid. It won't happen. Don't get that feeling o' hope in your chest. That's the worst thing of all, that wee chink in the dark. When it comes in the night, you clench it tight by the neck like you would kill a chicken so it doesn't get going. You stamp it out before they do.

I hear them muttering downstairs, offering the man tea.

'I want to see Mick on his own today,' he says, 'Just part of the routine. Is he in the house?'

'He's upstairs. I'll get him down.'

'No, no. I'll go up.'

Christ, he's coming up. Why's he doing that ? Better stand in case he thinks I was lyin' like a lazy bastard on ma bed. You can tell he's not used to ladders.

'Hello Mick.'

He kneels on the floor 'cos there's nothing to help him up the last bit. He looks as though he's going to play grizzly bears or somethin' on his hands an knees.

'Don't be afraid, Mick. I just wanted to speak to you.'

He struggles to his feet an dusts off his hands. He has to bend 'cos his head's in the rafters.

'How are you ?'

'Alright, sir.'

How can I say anythin' else with them listening down there ? Could I whisper it? If I signed to him that I wanted to whisper, would he know what I meant?

'You're very thin. Are you getting enough to eat ?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Come over here a minute, son.'

He feels ma ribs.

‘A bit too skinny. What are those marks on your wrists ? Let me see. How did you get these, Mick?’

Christ, what do I say ? I could tell him. The thing inside me wants to tell him. It’s blowin’ up like a bladder ready to burst. Tell him for God’s sake. But he won’t believe me. I know he won’t an they’re downstairs waitin’.

‘I was swingin’ on a tree, sir. On a rope like. Tarzan. I was playin’ a game.’

‘Indeed ? Lift up your semmit.’

He looks at the bruises.

‘And I suppose these were from the game too.’

‘I fell, sir’

‘Are you happy here, Mick?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You can tell me in confidence if you’re not. You can trust me.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good lad. Keep it up. You’re doing well.’

He pats me on the shoulder and turns to go down the ladder but he swithers at the top. He doesn’t know how to go down. In the end he goes down on his knees again and backs away, trying to find the steps with his foot. He looks so stupid I want to laugh.

I can hear them downstairs.

‘Mick is far too thin, Mrs Munro. You must see that he eats properly. You are well enough paid to see to that.’

‘I can assure you that he gets plenty of meat, sir. The same as ourselves. Whatever we have, he has and sometimes we go without to make sure he has enough. Don’t you worry about that, sir.’

‘How is he doing, Mr Munro? Is his work satisfactory.’

‘Doing very well, sir. A bit of a slacker, if he’s not watched, but they’re all like that nowadays, aren’t they? Turn your back and they’re half asleep. Mick’s a good boy on the whole.’

‘And these fearful marks on his wrists. How were they obtained?’

‘He was swinging on a rope hanging from a tree, playing like any healthy youngster.’

They were listenin’. I knew they were. Just as well I didn’t say.

‘They are not made by a rope. Something finer, I think.’

‘We whiles make rope from baler twine.’

‘I suppose it could be that. See that the wounds do not suppurate.’

‘I’ll treat them with some sulphur and archangel tar.’

‘Is that all you have?’

‘We use it for cuts on the sheep and it does fine for that.’

‘I’ll take your word for it. I’ll be back in a month to see how he is.’

‘Will you not stay for a cup of tea, sir?’

‘Thank you, no. I have other places to visit. Good day to you.’

*

*

*

George fills his pipe, carefully tamps down the tobacco and lights it with a match. Puffs of smoke pop from the corner of his mouth.

‘I’m not at all happy about that boy.’

He frowns as he gazes into the coal fire.

‘I can see that. You never said a word through dinner.’

His wife was deftly darning one of his socks, the wool stretched over a wooden mushroom.

‘Sorry. I was preoccupied.’

‘You were. What worries you particularly?’

‘He has these rope marks on his wrists – wounds really. The boy claims that he received them while playing Tarzan and the couple confirm his story.’

‘Nonsense. All carefully rehearsed.’

‘Yes. I think I agree. Another surprise visit is in order. The Munros were clearly flustered by the visit today.’

‘Maybe when he goes back to school he’ll talk to someone.’

‘I don’t think so. He never says a word. Doesn’t trust any of us. Pity about the last farm. They were good people but she had no choice really. She just couldn’t manage the place.’

‘It sounds as though it’s not going to work.’

‘Back to a home then. I don’t want that.’

Chapter 2

MICK

‘What did you say to that man?’

‘Nothing. I swear to God. Nothing.’

‘Aye well. If I find out you did, I’ll thrash the livin’ daylights outa you.’

He believes me. At least I think he does. Don’t know about her, though. She’s looking at me with narrow eyes.

‘Get up there and change outa they clothes and muck out the pigs.’

I hurry up the ladder before she says somethin’.

I like the pigs, although they stink. Their wee beady eyes watchin’ you as you muck out the pen an the snouts that make that snufflin’ noise. You get used to the smell but it clings to your clothes like it was alive, like it was another skin. If I ran from here, they would find me by the smell.

As I race past him in the kitchen he aims a slap to ma head but I dodge it, step into ma wellies at the door an run out to the midden. The barrow, caked with dung, is heavy an hard to handle but I wheel it round to the pig shed an stop at the pens. You have to watch that they don’t get out as you open their gate. You chase them to the back of the pen before you take the barrow in. I let them out once and he jumped up and down with rage. It was a laugh watchin’ him chase them round the yard but I paid for it later.

The big, wide shovel is alright for him but for me it’s hard to keep straight. I spill a lot of the pig shite as I scrape the pen. When I’m done, I wheel the barrow out to the midden. Now comes the hard bit. The midden is big an has three planks one after the other. You have to race the barrow up the first plank an keep your balance. If the wheel misses the plank, it sinks into the shite an, if you lose your balance, you’re in it up to your knees. I get ready an

take a deep breath. The planks are greasy an look steepern ever. I grip the barrow handles an race at midden. This time it works an I tip the shite into the end of the midden.

Fair pleased with myself I take a breather an look up the lane to the road. If I was going to run, I wouldn't go that way. That's the way they would think I would go. No. Back that way to the trees where the crows nest. But then where ? You'd have to keep the road in sight. That's the way to the city. Find my Mam. Don't know where she lives but she's in there somewhere. I'll find her. Don't you worry. An they wouldn't find me, not in there. I know how to dodge the polis an the sanny woman.

'What are you standin' there for, you lazy wee bastard ?'

I jump with fright an drop the barrow in the shite.

'No bloody use for anything. Get down here and cut swedes for the stirks. Hurry up for Christ's sake.'

I tug the barrow out of the midden an head for the turnip shed.

One day I will run. I will. Over to the trees. When, though? Better at night but I can't get down from the loft without waking them an they're watching me all day. They did go to a sale once an left me here but they tied me to the lavvy seat an locked the door. But there will be a time. Just have to wait.

I lift the spade an slice some turnips into bits an put them in a wire basket an then heave them into the turnip cutter. Takes strength to turn the handle but I can just manage it. Funny smell, sliced neeps, like pepper, as they fall into the basket. I carry them round an feed them into one of the troughs in the byre. The stirks love them.

Maybe when the school starts. That would be a chance. Would be like the thing if she took me every day, though, an got me at night. She couldn't but. Not every day. Just one day that's all I need. Back to my Mam. Beautiful, my Mam, always laughing. Bloody sanny lady.

*

*

*

George flicks through the file, wondering what to write under Subsequent History of the Case. He frowns as he reads the first comments of Simpson, another Officer, all carefully typed. Why could the man not write like everyone else? One of these young whippersnappers keen to display his skills. His own hand had been perfected when he had to practise between ruled lines in the book. His was clear, precise, elegant.

He glanced through the history.

‘Children utterly neglected by mother, improperly fed, clothed and tended.

Mother living in one of the lowest lodging houses in the city and her two

children painfully exposed to all kinds of vice and immorality. A hawker and

woman of bad character.’

Both the children had been taken into care and their mother forced to sign an agreement allowing the Committee to send them anywhere in the world. He did not approve of that. The condition seemed unnecessarily harsh. He had seen mothers who, under the most intolerable circumstances, had tried to keep the family together. He remembered Maggie Ewart whose man had been killed when his jacket caught in an industrial lathe and he was smashed like a doll against the machine. She had worked from before dawn till after dusk scrubbing floors, taking in washing, cleaning for big houses, anything to earn a pittance, but she had worn herself out and, in spite of her protests, the children were taken away anyway. Perhaps Mick’s mother was like that. Perhaps she had tried too. Some members of the Committee had no idea what women in the city slums had to suffer and the strength they needed to survive.

He reads what he had written after his first visit to Mick’s last placement,

‘Boy very happy. Couple pleased to have him. Say that he works well on

the farm and helps in the house. Boy says that he is happy in school. Wants to

know where his sister is living.’

Sad. The farmer had contracted lung cancer and his wife had to relinquish the tenancy. The placement had been so promising - unlike the Munros.

He wants to set down his suspicions but he needs some hard evidence before he can commit them to paper.

He lifts his fountain pen and smooths down the file.

‘Mick is worryingly thin and has wounds on his wrists which he claims he received in play. Foster parents confirm this. They say that his work is satisfactory but needs watching. They complain that 25 shillings does not cover expenses.’

He signs the document, lays down his pen and sits back, remembering Mick cowering in the corner of the loft as he climbed the ladder.

A poor farm, the Munros’. The lane leading up to the steadings almost impassable with deep twin ruts worn by the tractor and brambles hanging from the steep banks. The farm house showing all the signs of returning to nature, its gutters growing weeds, its slates green with lichen, its gable and chimney smothered under a heap of ivy. The shaws of the potato crop struggling to pierce a blanket of weeds and foggage in the hay field sprouting clumps of rashes above the choked drains. Slack fences hung with wool like washing lines where sheep had barged their way through. The midden leaking foul-smelling liquid across the yard.

On his first visit he had been on the point of turning back as a snarling collie, its teeth bared, sprang at his hand every time he reached to undo the gate hasp. Munro, however, had appeared, roared at the dog which slunk away, and came down to meet him. A sturdy man with a permanent frown and eyes which were never still, flitting from one thing to another as if an enemy might leap out from any direction, he had greeted him with a crunching handshake. His massive hand swallowed his own and the muscle on his arm rippled like a

serpent. The fabric over the peak of his tweed cap was worn away, his collarless shirt damp with sweat and his bib and brace overalls glistened with grease. The first impression had been one of an honest, hard-working farmer. It was the way he and his wife glanced at each other in the kitchen before they spoke that caused concern. The room had been cleaned and scrubbed for his arrival, the concrete floor still wet and the hearth gleaming. The wife had actually curtsied as he reached to shake her hand and, unlike her husband, had looked him in the eye and smiled. Yet there was something untrustworthy about her, something he could not fathom, and he was known to be a good judge of character.

He had asked to see the boy's bedroom and she explained that they only had the loft above the kitchen, they themselves sleeping downstairs in the next room. The loft had been swept and a hair mattress placed on the floor. The eiderdown and blankets, she said, were on their way. There was no electric light in the loft but she promised a Tilley lamp and a torch, the toilet being downstairs. The accommodation was far from satisfactory but the Committee was so short of foster placements that he had to take the risk.

George rises from his desk and gazes out across the back garden. His roses are spectacular, blazing in the evening sun. The Compassion on the fence is magnificent. He inhales, imagining its sweet scent. Beyond the roses the potatoes are in bloom in the vegetable patch, their blue flowers shimmering in the breeze. Edzell blues, his favourite. He compares their abundance to Munro's poor specimens and wonders why Munro can't find the time to weed his crop.

He and his wife had no children. In some ways he regretted that but, when he saw the misery and suffering which many orphan children had to endure, the shadow of his progeny possibly assigned to that fate frightened him. Many respectable parents through accident, illness or disablement had been reduced to penury and their children removed. He could not bear the thought of his children ending up in a home. In one home menstruating girls had to

have baths in disinfectant and were not supplied with sanitary towels. In another boys were punished with the strap for failing to learn a psalm. His memory was often disturbed by images of children sitting rocking on their beds, their eyes fixed blankly on the floor and their thumbs in their mouths. Still, he knew there were successes. One of his boys placed on a croft had just graduated from University, another had gained a Master's certificate at sea. He wondered whether the boys had been born with that ability, whether the parents, failing perhaps through no fault of their own, had passed on intelligence or whether the successes had been due to foster parents chosen by him. Or was it all a matter of luck? Probably. All a bit of a lottery. He sighed and walked through to the living room.

‘I'm just going to polish my shoes.’

‘Well see and put down some newspaper.’

He frowned at his wife and walked through to the kitchen, opened the cupboard, laid a sheet of newspaper on the floor and reached for his shoe-cleaning box. Everything laid out neatly – tin of polish, application cloth, duster. Shoes to be cleaned carefully on the paper. One thing he had learnt in the army was the technique of shining his shoes so that he could see his face in the polish. He filled the polish lid with a little water and sat down, dipped the cloth first in the water and then in the polish and started to apply the black wax in tiny circles on the toe of a shoe. He had had a comfortable war. Sometimes he felt guilty about that, having spent those years in the safety of an English manor house as a wireless instructor, a vital contribution of course but not as dangerous an occupation as that of the agents he trained for France. Most of them, he understood, never returned.

He could still read and send morse and often talked to himself by tapping out messages. ‘Pianists’ they were called, the wireless operators. With his left hand he tapped out a signal M U N R O I S A B U L L Y.

Chapter 3

MICK

I hate school. The way they call you names, all they posh kids. They know you're not one o' them. Jersey too wee an trousers too long hangin' down ablow your knee. An it's a new school an that's worse. Teachers don't like you. You get the strap for nothin' like wipin' your snot on your sleeve or getting' your tables wrong. It's the only chance, though, to get back to ma Mam. Bet they'll take me to school. Never let me go on ma own.

Today was potatoes. Sent out with a graip an a wire basket and a sack.

'One graip mark and I'll mark your arse.'

How can you dig tatties without stickin' the fork in one of them ?. You can't even see them under the ground.

'The Epicures, mind. Don't look so glaikit. I showed you.'

I went up to the field an looked at the drills. Were all the same an I couldn't remember what he said. I was so scared I would get it wrong but then I saw one shaw had been dug an I stuck the graip in the next one well behind the shaw an shook out the tatties. There they were all white an clean an not a fork mark. Clever boy, Mick.

I turned to see if he was watchin'. No-one there so I stood an looked at the trees.

If I ran from the school, it would be a different way. Not by the roads. They would catch you that way an I'd get lost across the fields. Then I saw this puff of smoke miles away an I says the railway, that's the way. Walk the track. That's the way back to Glasgow. Clever boy, Mick. That'll beat the bastards.

What do you eat, though, on the run ? Steal eggs. That's risky, goin' near the farms. Milk from doorsteps. Okay in the town but not out here. Grab a hen but Jesus you could be hung for that or sent to the gaol or sent to Australia. How do you do it? Can't be Davy

Crockett here and hunt animals. Money. You need money. I could nick off of them. I know where she keeps it, the bitch. But how do you buy things? Go into a shop and they'll know you're on the run an call the polis. You need a stash, Mick. Nick wee bitsa things, cheese an bacon an things. Wee bits so they don't see. Stash them away in a hidin' place. You've got it, boy..

I brought back the tatties, a whole half bag of them and he timmed them out on the floor to look for fork marks. Not one. The bastard. You could see he wanted to find one.

'Is this all you got?'

'All I could carry.'

'Aye. A right Jessie you. Bloody useless. Go and cut firewood till milking.'

I got the bushman saw from the shed an went round to the saw horse. Last time I broke the blade on a staple stuck in an old stob. He went wild at that an slapped me across the face. He cut himself when he fitted the new blade it was that sharp an I was pleased when I saw the blood running down his hand. Served him right.

If ma Da was here he would sort him out. Not big but hard as nails. Could lift me off of ma feet with one hand. I mind his smell. Oil an iron an fags. Used to dress up for the dancin' an he smelled different, soap and brylcreme. Shaved with a cutthroat. Used to watch the blade shavin' off the soap an whiskers makin' wee scratchy noises. When he was dead they shaved him but not as good as he did. Left tufts on his chin. They had a job carryin' the coffin up the close an they were pechin' like pigs when they got to the door. He lay in the room with his eyes shut an a bandage round the top of his head an where his arm was.

'What did they do with his arm?' I says.

'Shush' Red John was frownin' and lookin' over at my Ma.

She was sittin' in the chair greetin' with her face in her hands.

'Stupid,' Calum from across the stair says to his Da..

Biggern me but I burst his nose outside the cludgie in the back close. Wish I could burst Munro's nose. I didn't greet at the funeral. Not me. Ma wouldn't stop. We hugged her in the bed at night, me and my sister, but she went on and on till I you'd think she'd run outa water. I couldn't stand it an one night I roared at her to shut up. Wish I'd never done that. Ma sister slapped me for it.

I don't know where she is now. They had to lift her away from the close with her heels kicking and her teeth trying to bite their hands and Ma screaming out the window. Never saw her again. We were close, us two. Closern Ma and Da. Used to scratch each other's backs in the bed. It hurt when they took her away like a knife twirlin' in your guts. Never do that again, Mick, get that close to somebody.

'I don't hear that saw, you wee bastard'. Munro is in the byre.

I saw as hard as I can.

'Leave it and go for the cows and see and hang the saw in the shed.'

I do as he says an head down to the gate. Start my stash tonight. Makes me grin just thinking about it.

*

*

*

George stops the car at the farm road end and changes into his wellingtons. It is a fine day with a warm breeze that ripples the green oats in the field across the road. A better farm altogether with neat thorn hedges, regimented ranks of baled hay and acres of potatoes with not a weed to be seen. He wonders if Munro would have succeeded had he been blessed with better land. Probably not. He did not seem to be a lazy man yet the farm showed all the signs of neglect and indolence.

The lane leading up to the farm is lined with beech trees which, many years before, had formed a hedge. He stops for a moment to enjoy the peace, listening to the rooks in the distance and the sound of a tractor beyond the steadings. A good day. The war in Korea has ended. That conflict, coming so soon after 1945, had horrified him. More young lives to be wasted in hostile country far from home for a cause that he had described as dubious. Still, it is over and that brings a sense of contentment.

There is no-one about when he reaches the yard. Even the crabbit dog is not to be seen and there is no smoke from the chimney. The pungent smell of pigs, however, pervades the premises and hangs around like another person. He reckons that the tractor must be in the field beyond the potatoes and heads in that direction.

Munro is seated on the Ferguson sweeping hay into piles with a buckrake. His wife and Mick are building a ruck, heaving pitch-forks of hay on to its foundation. They don't see him at first and he stands at the gate watching them. Peasants have been repeating this task for centuries, he thinks, making fodder for their cattle, harvesting their crops to survive the winter. Season after season, struggling to avoid starvation. Not much progress really. A tractor instead of a horse but man still battling with the weather and still slaughtering his own kind. Munro sees him, stops the tractor and walks to meet him.

‘Good day, Mr Buchanan.’

‘Wonderful day. Perfect for the hay’

‘It's dry at any rate. Have to get it up before the rain.’

‘You've got good help I see.’

‘Aye. He's a good lad. Most of the time anyway.’

‘I would like to speak to him, if you don't mind. It won't take long. Soon be time for school and I need to have a chat about that.’

‘Fair enough, sir. I’ll send him up. I’m sure we can manage without him for a few minutes.’

Munro turns away and hurries back to the ruck. George watches him take the fork from Mick’s hands and prod him in the chest with his finger.

Mick ambles up to the gate. George sees that the wounds on his wrists are not healing.

‘Well, Mick. You’re good with the pitch-fork. Do you enjoy that work?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Walk with me a bit, Mick. I have something for you in the car.’

‘I was told to be quick. There’s work to be done.’

‘Mr Munro will understand. Come.’

Mick walks beside him with his head slightly turned away.

‘School soon, Mick. What do you think about that?’

‘Good, sir.’

‘Quite happy about a new school?’

Mick says nothing.

‘Are you worried?’

‘They’ll call me names.’

‘And how will you respond?’

‘Do nothing.’

‘That’s not how you dealt with it last time. You reacted violently and one of the pupils was sent to hospital.’

‘I won’t. I’ll be good.’

‘If they call you names. You tell the teacher.’

Mick says nothing. Of course he says nothing. George knows that the teacher will reprimand the offending pupils, making sure that they know that Mick is a tell-tale. The boy will be ostracised and possibly assaulted on the way home. Teachers that sympathise with Boarded-out children are thin on the ground.

‘Are you happy with the Munros?’

‘Yes, sir.’

He stops and places his hand on Mick’s shoulder.

‘Truly? We are alone here, Mick. You can trust me. If you have complaints, I will not tell the Munros that you have spoken to me but I will find a way of dealing with them. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And are you happy with them?’

‘I am, aye.’

George sighs and walks on. Why do they never trust him? He does everything he can to ensure that his charges are treated well and many of them are placed with good, God-fearing people. Yet, even when the placement is a success, the children maintain a polite distance, an impenetrable reservation.

When they reach the car he lifts out a brown paper parcel.

‘Some school clothes, Mick, and new boots. I think they will fit better than the last lot. See and look after them. I’m sure Mrs Munro will have boot polish. Polish them every day.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Now away you go back to the hay. I’m sure they’ll be missing you. I will call again soon. Goodbye, Mick.’

‘Goodbye, sir.’

He watches him shambling up the lane with his parcel under his arm, a small figure under the towering beech trees. Slim beams of sunlight sporadically blaze in the boy's copper hair. He will speak to the teacher before Mick enrolls in the school, explain about Mick's background and ask her to look out for any signs of maltreatment. She will, no doubt, agree enthusiastically. Most of them do, wishing to be seen as compassionate people, and many of them have the best of intentions, but few of them will risk antagonising local parents by defending orphan children against peers or foster parents. He doesn't blame the teachers. So many parents in country schools complain about the presence of troubled city children as a bad influence in their schools. Still, he will use all of his charm to win the teacher's sympathy.

Chapter 4

MICK

She held on to ma collar the whole way to school and never spoke. Not like her. Didn't have time to get ma stash. We stop at the gate. Ma socks keep falling down an they'll laugh at that. I'll burst their fucken noses, the wee bastards. She swings me round an shakes my neck.

'Say one wrong word, boy, and I'll flay you alive. She'll tell me, don't you worry. I'll ask the teacher when I come for you.'

I can see them looking at me. They'll have garters in their socks.

The teacher comes out an rings the bell and they go into lines.

'Go on. Hurry up.'

She shoves me at the gate.

My guts are turnin' over but I go over an stand in the boys' line. The boys look at me all the way an say nothin'. I go to the back. The boy in front of me holds his nose an grins at the other. I want to kick his heel but I've got to be good 'cos I'm going to do a runner.

We go into the classroom an she calls me over an stands beside me in front of the class. She smells of mothballs.

'Good morning children.'

'Good morning Miss Dunlop,' they all say.

'We have a new boy today and I want you all to welcome him to our school. His name is Mick and he is living with Mr and Mrs Munro. I'm sure we can all imagine what it is like to arrive in a new school and how hard it is to make friends so I hope you will all try to make friends with Mick. Now go to your desk Mick – the one just there beside little Craig.'

I go down to the empty desk an put the seat down an sit. The boys beside me are all youngern me. She's put me with the P Ones.

She comes down with a jotter an a pencil. She has shoes like a wee girl an they clatter on the floor.

'Now Mick I want you to write your name inside on the first page while the others say their tables. You can stay in your seat but I like everybody to stand when they say their tables.'

I hate writing. I can't make the pencil do the right thing. It goes over the lines in the jotter, the worst are the capitals. I hold it as tight as I can till ma fingers shake but it makes no difference. I hold ma other arm over the page so that the wee one beside me can't see.

The others stand up an start to say their tables. Take a breather, Mick.

The ink mark on ma desk looks like a strap coming out of the inkwell. Somebody made it a long time ago. I wonder if there is ink left in the inkwell an poke the pencil in the hole. It comes out with a wee black bit at the bottom. I start to draw an M on ma hand.

'Mick,' she shouts an they all go quiet.

'You're supposed to be writing your name. Please concentrate.'

I wipe the pencil on ma trousers an go back to writing an they go back to sayin' their tables.

Dinner time'll be the best time to go. No. That'll be too late. Too near lousing time. But break'll give them time to look for me. No, better be lunch right enough.

At break we get our milk an I pull off the lid an stand against the wall. Then I go out an wait for the big boys. Two of the girls are playin' with a ball against the wall an look at me and smile. I let on not to see them. Don't want the boys seeing me being friendly with girls. The other girls are twirling a rope with one of them in the middle. She's a good jumper and her pigtails flop up and down as she jumps. The boys are playing football near the gate.

Buncha jessies. Can't kick a ball for toffee. I'd like to go and show them how but don't want a fight. Just behave till dinner.

One of the girls comes over.

'Hello Mick.'

I wish she'd leave me alone but she has nice blue eyes and a blue cardigan so I nod at her.

'Do you live at the Munros?'

'Aye.'

'Poor you.'

'Oh aye? Why's that?'

'Nothing. Nothing. Do you like it there?'

'Course.'

'They're not your Mum and Dad, though, are they?'

'What of it?'

'Doesn't matter.'

She turns away and skips back to the others. Her socks are pure white and her shoes are shinin'. Bet she has a Mum an Dad an lives in a posh house. She's nice, though. I'd like to talk to her more on her own.

The teacher comes out an rings the bell an we line up again. I stand at the front an wait to see if any of the boys says anythin'. The big one with the hair oil an long trousers stands next to me.

'You're boarded out, eh? One of them orphans.'

Kick his leg, Mick. Kick the bastard. Then I remembered.

We go in an she gets us round the piano for singin'. They all know the song so I just stand there like a dummy.

‘One man went to mow, went to mow a meadow.’

Her fingers are like hens’ claws scratching at the notes. The big boy looks at me an grins like I’m stupid cos I don’t know the song.

After the singing we go back to our desks an she reads a poem. She says it like she means it.

‘A chieftain to the Highlands bound

Cries “Boatman do not tarry !’

She almost greets at the end. God’s sake it’s only a poem.

The van with the dinners comes in the gate an my guts start to churn. Not long now. The man drivin’ has a fag in his mouth an his cap is tilted back. The dinner lady comes out an he laughs with her an he grabs the big tubs by the handles an carries them in. I hear him put them down in the kitchen an he says,

‘Mince an tatties and cabbage, Mrs Dale. Can’t do bettern that, eh? Put hairs on your chest.’

‘None of that talk, Mr Morris, thank you very much. The children might hear.’

There’s a laugh in her voice, though.

He bangs shut the van door an drives out the gate.

The teacher says it’s time for dinner.

‘Put your jotters and pencils away and line up at the hatch, youngest at the front as usual.’

Don’t know if I can eat ma dinner. Mouth’s all dry and guts are shakin’. The dinner lady rattles up the hatch door an we stand in line. She flups out mince an tatties an neeps on ma plate an semolina an jam for puddin’ an I take ma tray over to the desk. Have to eat for God’s sake, don’t know when I’ll get it on the run. Wish I’d got ma stash. Tatties dry an stick

in ma mouth. Teacher's lookin' at me too as if she can guess. I look at my plate. I hate semolina, it makes me boak. What'll I do ? Nudge the wee boy next to me.

'You want ma puddin' ?'

'Na. I hate that stuff. She makes you eat it, though.'

Jesus. What'll I do ? There'll be a row if I don't eat it. Shovel into ma drawers. Na, it'll run down. Swill round the jam. Swallow it, Mick. Only way. Make a fist like you're gonna fight an gob it in. Don't breathe. Gulp like its snot. Go. Well done, Mick. Another. Think of Mam. Do it for her. Beautiful Mam with the black hair. Another. One more an that's it.

Take my tray up to the hatch an out.

Round the back of the bogs an over the wall. Sneak under hedge, jesus the thorns, bare knees black. Run now. Close to the hedge, up the field. Don't look back. Run, Mick, run. Sheep lookin'. Stay still, sheep. Don't run. Ewe an lamb in the way. Swerve round like Bobby Johnston. Back on the pitch. Keep goin' but legs rubber an chest burnin'. Sick comin' up. Stop an boak. Semolina an mince. Run again. Dog barkin' at the farm there. Hope not at me. Go on, Mick. You can do it, Mam says. I'm comin' Ma. Squeeze through fence into trees. Safer here, take a rest.

Big grey trees like elephant's skin, like arms an legs an wee hairy nuts on the ground. Can you eat them, Ma ? Na, better not. Head for the railway, Mick. I'm free, Ma. Away from they bastards an their ropes an their whips. No more kickins or rotten meat stuffed in the mouth. No more creepin'around shit-scared of him or sick with the smell of her an her stinkin' udders. Free like a bird, like a gull over the seas. Go where you want. Wee bird in the trees here somewhere, chirpin' in the leaves, but it's awfu' quiet. Wouldn't like to be here in the dark .

Through the railway fence an down on to the track. Listen. Somebody said put your ears to the rail an you can hear a train comin'. Rails are all shiny on the top. Walk on the sleepers not on the stones. Easy. Warm here and nice smell off whins like ice cream. God I could go an ice cream, a big cone. Don't think about it, Mick. Make you hungry. What'll you eat tonight, eh? Didn't thinka that ya daft bastard. No shops up here. Where's that ten shillin' note? Aye, here it's all crumpled up. No use with no shops.

Listen, is that a train? Where'll I hide ? Kneel on a sleeper, ear to the track. Nothing. Just a buzz in the ear. Have to work out where to hide. Plan like a commando, black face at night, kill with ma bare hands, buph ! Lie low in the day. A place to hide, every step of the way. Plan, that's the trick, and keep going today, though. Walk tonight. How? How do you walk in the dark, Mick? Jesus. No street lights or nothin'. God. Black as tar. No such thing as bogles, boy. Grow up.

*

*

*

'Sorry I'm late, Miss Dunlop. Good of you to wait.'

'I'm so worried, Mr Henderson.'

'I'm sorry you have had this to contend with. When did he disappear?'

'After lunch. I rang the bell and as soon as the pupils lined up we noticed he was missing. I took the pupils to their desks and asked if anyone had seen Mick. George told me that he had seen him going to the boys' toilets so I asked Mrs Cunningham, the dinner lady, to look but there was no sign of him anywhere. I asked the pupils if he had spoken to any of them or if there had been any bullying or name-calling but they seemed be as puzzled as I was.'

‘I called at the Munros on my way over. There was no sign of him there. They did not seem surprised.’

‘No. Perhaps he had his reasons to leave. Certainly it has nothing to do with the school. Our children were all very welcoming.’

‘Of course. Can you think of anywhere he might hide?’

‘There are plenty of barns and empty sheds on the farms. He could be anywhere.’

‘I will have to inform the constable.’

‘You may not have to. Here’s Mrs Munro in a hurry.’

In a hurry indeed, flushed and wheezing like a pair of bellows. I can hear her before she reaches the gate. Her wellingtons are caked with mud and her skirt is hanging down disgracefully.

‘The wee bastard !’ she shrieks.

‘Please Mrs Munro, control yourself. Stop and take a breath and please refrain from using foul language. I can see you’re upset. Do calm down.’

‘Ten fucken shillings.’

‘Mrs Munro ! Please. It is most offensive in front of Miss Dunlop.’

‘Never mind her. He’s stolen ten shillings. My egg money. The thievin’ wee bastard. If I catch him, I’ll whip the skin off his arse.’

‘I would hope not, Mrs Munro, and I hope you have never done such thing. I will see that you are compensated. Now, perhaps you could calm down and help us to find the boy. Can you think of anywhere he might hide?’

‘Back to the city. That’s where he’ll go. Back to that whore of a mother of his. Look there. And he can stay there for all I care. Never want to see him again nor any more of his kind. Thievin’ bastards, the whole lot of them. And I want his keep up till today. Cost me a fortune he has.’

‘You will be paid, Mrs Munro. Never fear. Now I must find the constable and inform him about Mick and you will need to report the theft. I can mention it to the constable, if you like, but he will need the have a statement from you.’

‘No. Never mind. As long as I get compensation.’

She turns and waddles away, a little calmer than when she arrived.

‘Thank you, Miss Dunlop. As I said, my apologies for the distress. I’m afraid these children are a bit unpredictable. Most of them have been through terrible times and are fearfully damaged by their experiences but, thanks to our foster parents, some of them recover and become useful and indeed admirable citizens. I had hoped that Mick, who is an intelligent boy, might mature in such a way.’

‘I do hope that he is found, Mr Henderson, and that he is returned to more suitable foster parents.’

‘Yes, I think I have misjudged the Munros. Mea Culpa, Miss Dunlop. But we are so short of good placements. However, we will need to find him first. Thank you for your help. Good evening’

Chapter 5

SLIGO

The river Clyde glitters in the sun while, beneath the surface, it drags the city's toxic sludge towards the sea. A raft of debris – battens, boxes, straw and a mattress – swirls under the bridge. Gulls quarrel over a pail of slops flung from a steamer on the Broomielaw. Yesterday's rain lingers in the gutters stained with rainbows of oil. The city's veins pulse sluggishly with trams, buses, trucks and cars. It tries to breathe but its lungs shudder and sigh. The air tastes of sulphur and soot. A hostel for homeless men stands five storeys high, its columned doorway a legacy of former grandeur

Heave myself upright, flinging off the blanket, and rattle open the drawer of the cabinet. Baccy tin is still there and the matches. Today is the day. Get to fuck out of the city, out of the Model. Lay a Rizla on the cabinet and feed out a line of dry tobacco. Fingers don't work too good. Roll a fag and spark a match to light it. Suck in smoke and try not to cough. Musn't cough. Won't stop if it starts. Old guy in next cubicle coughs and sounds like scraps of his lungs come up.

Where's my boots? Must have kicked them under the bed. Could do with new socks. Look at them. Toe nail's sticking out and holes in the heels. No use for the road.

Great day yesterday walking on the Broomielaw down by the Irish boats. Makes you want to take a trip. Could just slip up a gangway with nobody looking and sail down the Clyde. Got some VP wine and sat in the sun on the suspension bridge looking down the water and seeing the gulls swooping at garbage.

Bend and pull my boots from under the bed. Look after them. Learnt that from the CP in Spain. Wonder if the old guy next door has socks. Not going to need them for long and he stinks. Whole place stinks right enough of pish and Dettol and sweat. Right rabbit warren

full of half rotten carcasses and half-dead ones like me. Five storeys high of human waste. Used to be a poor house they say. Haul on boots and tie the whangs. Get a shave in the bogs later.

Still have my clothes on so don't need to dress. Stand and tug up trousers held up with string and lift down old army greatcoat from peg, collar black with grease, buttons long gone. Check pocket for razor. All in place, carefully wrapped in cloth with brush and stick of soap. Look after the razor. Good for the Neds as well if they go for you in the street. Roll back the mattress and find that rip. Christ what a stink but there's my wallet in among the horsehair. Leather rim on my beret worn out and there's a hole in the top but beret's special. All I've got from ma uniform twenty years ago.

Hide everything 'cos these bastards here would snatch the shirt off your back.

Check next door see if he's got socks. Number 133 on the door. Dead to the world with his mouth hanging open and slavering on the pillow and lips blue with the meths. Still alive though. Lift the blanket. No socks. Soles of his feet white like wax. Christ the mattress is soaking where he's pee'd himself. Poor old sod. Any money in his jacket? No, didn't think so. Down the corridor past all the doors peeling green paint and dented with boot marks.

Step out, blink in the sun though it's early. Hard to walk on cobbles in the yard.

Round to the caff at the suspension bridge. Mug of tea and bacon roll. Sit and watch the buses and another old guy from the Model. Crouched over his tea laced with meths. Grips his mug as if someone was going to steal it, fingers like claws coming out of army mitts. Godsakes his shoes are gapping and you can see his toes. Look after your boots, Sligo. That's what the commissar said in the brigade and he was right squelching in the mud in Jarama. Still look after them. Neatsfoot oil.

Queer painting here right across the wall. Lots of working folk in their houses with piece bags and caps and some of them baking bread an cooking and some of them round a table holding out their hands to this man an he's giving them food. Right ghostly he is. Supposed to be Jesus I think, feeding the working folk. Could have done with him in Madrid.

Out on to Clyde Street and through to St Enoch's. Can smell the coffee from Coopers. Up Buchanan Street and head for the canal. Wish I had socks. Get a rest on the canal bank though and then head for the railway. Good huts there for the night. Found Liverpool Jim in one last summer, been there for days, maggots crawling in his eyeholes. Stinking he was. Nothing in his pockets, some bastard been there already. Good guy, Jim, always share his bottle but not his baccie. He chewed his and spat black gobs on the floor. Suppose I should have told the polis but when you find a guy dead you tell them nothing, you keep moving, say nothing in case you get done for it.

Sligo slopes off up the street, tall, lean, beret tilted, greatcoat tied with twine, head leaning forward and hands in pockets. No-one glances in his direction or, if they do, they look away quickly, finding his appearance menacing. Unshaven, unwashed, eyes threaded red, lips blue, conjuring up images of filth and nights of oblivion spent in gutters. Dangerous, they think, unpredictable, volatile, brain minced with alcohol. Some move to the kerb to avoid him, others press against shop windows. A face in a passing tram window watches him briefly, blinks and turns away. "Vernon's Pools" below the face - win £100,000 for a penny. Into the station, nicks a couple of apples and a tomato from the kiosk and slinks away.

Sunlight on the canal and swallows swooping for flies along the water. Warm and quiet here. Take off my boots and wash my feet. Socks stick to the skin but I'll wash them too. Look after your feet, comrade. Had good socks then and boots and a Russian rifle with

hammer and sickle stamped on it. A beauty. Held back the fascist bastards all day. Sunny Spain. Ballocks. Wring out the socks and let them dry on the grass. Take out the tin and roll a fag.

Something moving in the reeds there. Not like a coot. Creep over in my bare feet. Something in a sack, half-sunk. Christ it's moving! Get a stick and pull it in. Jesus it's alive. A kitten for Godsake ! Some bastard chucked it in to drown.

Poor wee thing. Soaking wet and fur sticking up like a hedgehog. Rub it dry and wrap it in my beret. Mew, mew. Starving an shaking. Stick it down my front to get warm. Need to get milk or something. On with my socks and boots. There, there, wee thing. I'll get you milk. Don't know where but I'll get it and tonight we'll head for the railway and doss in one of the huts.

* * *

'I'll do what I can Mr Buchanan but the lad could be anywhere.'

'I do understand, constable, but I am very worried.'

'What was he wearing ?'

'Just a jersey, no jacket, short flannel trousers, socks and boots.'

'Just as well it's fine weather then. I'll have a look in some of the barns and alert the farms round about.'

'Thank you. If you do find him, please take him to the station and let me know. I don't want him returned to the Munros.'

'I see. Aye, I'll take him back and keep him till you arrive.'

'Splendid. I'll be in touch. Good night, constable,'

'Good night, sir.'

George returns to the car, throws his jacket on the passenger seat and fumbles in the pocket for his pipe. With his small penknife he scrapes out the bowl, winds down the window and knocks out the ash, wondering where Mick would hide. He has already driven round all the roads, watching for movement in the hedges or on farm roads. He is convinced that something had happened at the Munros which prompted Mick to flee. Clearly the boy had planned the escape and there must have been a reason for that. He fills his pipe, strikes a match and watches the flame dip over the bowl as he sucks.

A Jeep would be useful in the search. He had driven one in England, bouncing over the rough ground and sliding through the ruts left by the army trucks. Great fun, particularly as it was on an illicit adventure off the camp with the trainees. A motley crew, the men he trained there - journalists, salesmen, bankers, actors, playboys, tradesmen – and women too. All trained for espionage and sabotage behind the Nazi lines in France. What he had taught them could save their lives and provide crucial information to British Intelligence. It was an immense responsibility, a vital contribution. For the first time in his life he had seen himself as significant, having a real purpose. The men respected him. He had never felt like that since the war. Civilian life seemed so dull, so pedestrian, after the excitement of the war. He still found it difficult to adjust. Perhaps that's why he looked for something challenging, something useful to pay respect to the sacrifices of his students.

He had trained the agents not only to use wireless sets but also to memorise codes and complex security checks. They were warned that the German direction-finding service – *Funk Peil Dienst* – was constantly trying to find them. They had to keep moving. If they were caught, they knew that they would be in the hands of the Gestapo and probably tortured and killed. Courageous people. He admired all of them. He remembers Vera, the first woman he trained, who had worked as a milliner in Paris before the war and who, he learnt later, had been killed by lethal injection in a concentration camp. And the alluring Noor Khan, born in

Russia of a Sufi father and an American mother, who was flown into France and killed in Dachau.

His students came from all over the world – Canada, Mauritius, South Africa, America, Australia and , of course, France. Regardless of their origin or class, they were his children, even if many were older than him. He felt protective of them, training them to the highest standard so that they would survive. In spite of his efforts, far too many were caught or betrayed and were killed in concentration camps. Not many Scots among them. The Brigadier, Colin Gubbins, had Scottish roots, his grandfather coming from the Isle of Mull but there was nothing in his voice to hint at a Hebridean connection. George had missed Scotland at times, surrounded by so many exotic accents off duty. He had hoped for a posting to Arisaig or Meoble or Lochailort, all training bases for special forces and all set in magnificent Highland scenery but he had been sent to Surrey.

Surrey. The gentle, wooded parish of the North Downs and the ancient manor house at the foot of the Hog's Back. He remembers the finches twittering in the ivy on the warm brick walls and the swarm of flying ants drowned on the surface of the swimming pool. He can hear the harsh voice of the sergeant putting the men through their fitness training, the constant tapping of Morse keys, the endless French conversations, the laughter of the trainees. He can hear the wind in the pines and see the heather on the ridge of the Hog's Back where he walked on free afternoons, the only place he could find which in any way resembled his native land. Nearly sixteen years ago.

He places the pipe in an ashtray, pulls out the choke and starts the car. Time to go home. One last tour of the roads in the dusk, hoping to catch a glimpse of Mick.

*

*

*

Kitten won't drink. I got milk for her and tried her with the cream off the top in a tin lid but no. Stuck cream on my finger and tried that on her lips. Lit a fire in the railway hut last night and wrapped her in my beret next to it. I was going to stuff her down my front but reckoned I might squash her in the night. Anyway fire went out in the night and the wee thing was chittering in the morning. She's not breathing too well either. Would take her to a vet but vets cost money.

Sun shinin' outside. Better take her out. Bloody freezing in here. Roll a fag first though. Mind in Madrid. Fags like gold dust. Some tried nut shells and leaves off the trees and bootlaces. Working folk were good to us and got us baccie.. You looked forward to parcels from home for British fags. Not that I got any but my comrades did and shared them out. You wouldn't get much for a pound a week anyhow. That was our pay. A pound a week but you got all your food and that. Soup and beans and rice, sometimes rissoles and bread. And in summer you could pick fruit off the trees, oranges, cherries and apples and olives. Good that way.

Mind the smell of blossom in the spring. Some good days right enough. Football in the sun. Spanish beat us hands down.

Lift the wee thing gently and stick her down my front. Be warm in there. Slug down the last of the milk and out on to the track. Listen for trains. Could walk on the track but the sleepers are too close together, you have to take wee short steps and that tires you out so walk on the cinders even if they're on a slope. And watch for bits of coal. Put them in the pocket for a fire at night.

Listen. There's a clink. Likely the railway walker ahead, clinking those spring things into the rails with his hammer. They're alright usually these boys. Lonely life most of them like ourselves. There he is.

'Aye. Grand mornin'.'

‘So it is.’

‘Stay in the hut last night?’

‘Aye.’

‘Nobody bother you?’

‘No. Why?’

‘Polis out lookin’ fer a wean.’

‘On the line? Not often they come up here.’

‘Naw. Polis shouted down to me from a bridge back there.’

‘You know anything about cats?’

‘Missus has one. Eats us outa house an home, greedy fat bastard.’

Drag the kitten out of my shirtfront.

‘Can’t get her to drink.’

‘She’s had it, pal, I would say. Find her on the track?’

‘No. Some bastard tried to drown her in the canal.’

‘Aye. Folk are like that. Don’t give a shit. I’d take it to a vet if you wanna save it.’

‘No. Vet’s cost money. I’ll do what I can myself.’

‘Good luck well. I think it’s had it. Better get on.’

‘Thanks anyway.’

Polis around. Don’t like that. Nosey bastards. Stuff the kitten back in my front. Keep the wee thing warm anyway. Better she dies in comfort.

Chapter 6

‘What the fuck are you doing here?’

Didn’t see him at first, boy skulking in the corner of the hut. Shit scared but a big lump of coal in his fist

‘Nothin’.’

‘That’s no answer. On the run, eh?’

‘Naw. Goin’ to see ma mam.’

‘And she knows you’re coming?’

‘Aye. She’ll be waitin’ for me.’

‘Will she now? Where does she stay?’

‘Glasgow.’

‘You’re the wean the polis are after.’

His face changes. Wee bits of defiance melt away.

‘Please, mister. Don’t turn us in. They’ll put me back to the Munros. They’ll whip me, mister.

Whip me till I bleed. They tied me to a cludgie wi’ no clothes on. Honest. Am not lyin’.’

I believe him, poor wee bastard.

‘So you ran away? Is that it?’

‘Couldn’t take any more, mister.’

‘It’s you the polis are after. You can’t stay here well. If the polis find you here with me, it’s me they’ll slap in the cells. Abducting a child they’ll say.’

‘Just till the morn’s morn, mister. I’ve blisters on ma feet.’

‘You think they’ll heal overnight. Just like that. You’re soft in the head.’

‘Please.’

‘Just till morning then but I get the planks. Those planks there for sleeping on. My days of dossing on the ground are long gone. Have you any grub on you?’

‘Naw.’

‘Stupid question.’

Reach for the kitten. Christ it's dead, just hanging there. Must have died in my front.

'Did you kill it, mister?'

'No. For fuck's sake, what would I do that for?'

'I just thought . . .'

'Well, don't think. Mind your own business.'

Go out and fling it in the bushes. Watch it spinning away in the air. Don't like this feeling inside, feeling sorry, sad. Don't want that back. That crying. Once picked up a wean in the street in Madrid. After a German bomb. Picked him up thinking he was okay but his guts fell over ma sleeve. Still alive. Looked at me like I could help him. He died in my arms. That feeling just burst out of me and I knelt down in the dust and cried like a baby. Don't want that again. Not ever. Anyways it's just a kitten for fuck's sake. Just a fucken animal. Go back in.

'You bury it, mister?'

'Aye. You go out and get some kindling, dry twigs and things and wee bits of coal if you can find them on the track. What's your name by the way?'

'Mick. What's yours?'

'Never mind mine. Just go.'

Wonder if I've a boy somewhere. My mate Jim said Deirdre was pregnant when I left. Deirdre an Bhroin, Deirdre of the Sorrows. That's why I left. Told my pals it was to fight the fascists in Spain and it was right enough but I had to get away as well. Didn't want to be a Da and she was a Tim and would never have done away with it. Maybe I've a son somewhere or a daughter even. Jesus God. Another me.

Mick comes back with a wee bundle of twigs.

'Is that all you could get? Have to do. Put them on the cinders here.'

Bit of newspaper from my pocket and scrunch it up an lay the kindling on top.

'Did you get any coal?'

'Some bits.'

'See over in the corner there's the end of a shovel. Give us it here.'

Light the fire and wait for the coal to catch. Three eggs in my pocket borrowed from a henhouse down the line. Fry them on the shovel. And two rolls.

‘You boarded out, son?’

‘Aye.’

‘Why’s that? Your Mammy not able?’

‘They said that. The green lady an them.’

‘You not have a Da?’

‘He died when I was wee.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Find ma Ma.’

‘No but after that?’

‘Join the army.’

‘Jesus Christ! What do you want to do that for?’

‘Want to be a soldier.’

‘Oh aye? I’ll tell you what being a soldier’s like. It’s being shit scared one minute an bored to death the next. I was a soldier, son. In the Fifteenth Brigade in Spain. At Jarama. Me and my mates. One of them caught it from a shell and I crawled out the trench to help him but he wasn’t there. Not in one piece anyway. Bits of him all over the place. When I crawled back there was this other man just sitting there but he had no head just a mess of bloody flesh at his collar. That’s what it’s like. Only twenty four out of a hundred and six Brigaders came out of Brunete. And I caught one too. A bang like you’d been hit by a train and then black. At first I thought I was on my face in the mud an then I knew what it was. I was buried, son. Under the sod and alive and I couldn’t move. Scared? Christ I thought it was the end. Mud in my mouth an up my nose and pain in my side like a lion was chewing me. Here, son, here’s eggs for you and a roll. Don’t be a soldier. Anything but a soldier. By the time you’re old enough they’ll maybe stop the call up and, if you get the call, just fuck off to the wilds. Up north or away to France. Just disappear.’

‘Did you ever shoot anybody?’

‘You eat your eggs and never mind that. I’ll go and hunt for coal.’

Under the mud I was. When they dug me out I was sobbing like a wife at a funeral. Took me to hospital, screaming on the lorry with a big black hole in my side. Annie Murray. Won't forget her. A nurse from Fife. Braver than most men and calm and kind. Only fell out once when I shouted at this Italian in another bed. Hate fucken Eyeties. Their planes dropped wee chocolate boxes with hand bombs in them for the children to pick up. Blew up in their faces. I swore at that Eyetie and Annie gave me a row. Felt bad about it after 'cos the poor bastard died that night.

Wonder where she is now, Annie Murray. Don't think she'd think much of me and the way I live. Came back from the Big War, back from Palestine, and couldn't get a job. Soon as they heard I'd been in Spain they turned me down. Must be a commie him. A commie for fuck's sake. Don't get me wrong. The commies in the Brigade were good guys and the commissar gave his life for the cause. But I was there to fight the fascists not to listen to long boring speeches about politics. Anyway no work after the war.

'Thanks, mister.'

'What?'

'Thanks for the eggs.'

'Need your food, son, if you're running from polis.'

'I've no money.'

'Don't need money. Watch for hen houses by the track and bread vans in the early morning down in the streets. Get milk there too at the doors.'

There they are in a small hut made of sleepers with a crumbling brick chimney. Smoke curls slowly into the summer dusk. Sligo rolls a fag on his knee as he sits by the fire. Mick sits on the floor, gazing into the coals, his hands clasped round his bare knees. They could be father and son. As the light fades, a cold breeze sweeps along the track, funnelled between the steep banks.

'Where you goin' tomorra, mister?'

'Don't know yet.'

'Can I come with you?'

‘No. You’re looking for your Ma, mind.’

‘Am feart o’ the polis.’

‘Look, son. I’ll show you how to get to Glasgow without them seeing but that’s it. End of story. Right?’

‘Right.’

‘Where’s your Ma anyway?’

‘Gorbals.’

‘Aye but where?’

‘Don’t know what it’s called but I mind the street.’

‘You haven’t a fucken clue, have you?’

‘Aye I do. I’ll find her.’

‘Maybe. You’d better get some sleep. Here take my coat an wrap yourself in it.

It’ll get cold when the coals die down.’

I doss down on the planks. Middle of the night a train comes roaring past, flames belching from its funnel. Boy yells in fright and starts running about in the dark.

‘Fuck’s sake, son.’

Grab his arm and he lashes out at my face.

‘Son, son. Calm down. It’s me. It’s me. It’s only a train.’

‘Jesus Christ. I didnae do it. Please. I didnae.’

‘You’re okay, son. Calm down. No-one’s going to hurt you.’

He calms down and starts to greet.

‘Fuck’s sake, son. Don’t greet. No need for that. You’re okay, You’re safe.’

He rolls himself in my coat and sobs himself to sleep. Poor wee mite. If I’d the bastards here who leathered him , I’d slit their fucken throats.

Chapter 7

MICK

Don't know why he did that. Took me all the way to the river. Never said nuthin' when he left. Got us a mug a tea an' a roll in the caff, stood up an whirled away like he was in a hurry. Wonder if it's all stories, him bein' a soldier an that. Doesn't look like a soldier. Was good to me tho. I went across the suspension bridge and into the Gorbals. Just can't mind where we were with ma Mam. Streets look all the same. Been up hunnerds o' closes askin' for her. Women open the door a wee chink an shake their heads an say nothin'. One auld guy came out an smacked me in the mouth an tellt me to fuck off. Only askin' for ma Mam. Legs are getting' sore now, up and down all they stairs, an guts think ma throat's cut. Starvin'. Maybe I could nick somethin' outa that Paki shop.

Comin' down the stair this woman was sittin' on the bottom step wi' her hand on a pram handle.

'Have you seen my Ma? Bridget Crossan.'

'Naw, son. No Bridget Crossan in this close. Don't know the name either. Listen, son, gies a han wi' the pram up the stair, will ye? I cannae make it an' the kids cannae hear me shoutin'.'

'Aye, sure.'

She gets up and starts pullin' an I start pushin'. Bump.Bump. She's awfu' thin an pechin' at every step. Stops an leans on the wa' on the first landin'.

'You awright Missus?'

'Aye, fine. Fine, son.'

We goes another lot a stairs and starts coughin' like a sick cow, like she was goin'

to puke. I stands there waitin', thinkin' she goin' to snuff it but she stops in the end an goes on up.

We comes to her place an' the door's open an' she goes in an I'm left wi' the pram. She comes back out.

'Come in, son. Bring it in.'

Four kids. Wee one just in a vest wi' ketchup on the front an his wee willie pokin' out. Girl in a dress an bare legs wi' mud on her knees. Boy wi' head shaved an blue stuff all over it. Looks like the Mekon. Boy bit youngern me wi' trousers on an socks wi' no toes. Lookin' at me like he was goin' to burst ma nose. Just let him try. Big girl takes the pram off me. Doesn't even say nuthin'.

Woman takes bread outa the pram an cuts slices on the table an clarts them wi' jam an gives pieces to the kids. She makes me a piece too.

'Here son. For helpin' me up the stair.'

'Thanks missus.'

'Mary wet some tea in the big pot.'

'We've nae milk Ma.'

'Just have to do without then. Tea's fine an' there's sugar there.'

Big girl fills the kettle at the sink an goes over to the fire.

'Need coal, Ma, or wood or somethin'. Fire's near out.'

The ashes are spillin' out onto the floor an Mary pushes them in wi' her shoe.

'Can I stay here the night, missus?' I says.

'Naw,' says Mary, 'there's nae room.'

'He's lookin' for his Ma for God' sake. Leave him alone, Mary. Where were you last night, son?'

'In a hut on the railway.'

‘Have you run from a home or somethin’?’

‘Naw. I was stayin’ wi’ ma Da in Dundee an he took ill an died an am lookin’ for my Ma to stay wi’ her’

‘What did you call her again?’

‘Bridget Crossan.’

‘Not about here, son. Mary, have you heard tell o’ Bridget Crossan?’

‘No.’

‘Don’t mind her, son. She’s aye crabbit. Anyways you can stay but you’ll have to sleep on ma coat on the floor. John, you go out an see if you can find some coal. Take this yin with you. What’s your name, son?’

‘Mick.’

‘Take Mick with you. Get coal or bitsa wood. He’ll help you carry them.’

John digs under the bed an gets his shoes an puts them on. Near dark now on the stair.

‘Got any fags?’ he says.

‘Naw.’

Never says about the ten shillin’.

‘Where’ll we get coal about here? No railway here.’

‘Round at the stables. Whiles they leave bits on the cart an drop them by the shed.’

We goes round an right enough there are bitsa coal on the cobbles. I goes over to the shed an there’s a big heavy padlock on the door so I goes round the back to see if there’s a way in an there’s a windae high up.

‘Nae use,’ he says, ‘Duffy keeps a fucken big dug in there. I tried.’

We fills our pockets wi’ bits and go back.

‘Good lads,’ she says.

‘Is that all?’ says Mary.

Enough to get the fire goin' an get some tea.

The crowded tenements at night are never quiet. The streets outside echo with voices, some in anger, some in snatches of song, some in despair. Even as the gas lights behind the windows snuff out one after another, the closes murmur and move. A child coughs ceaselessly in its sleep, cats screech among the refuse in the back yards, a mother moans in a box bed beside her kids as she scratches her bites, a bread van rattles over the cobbles and, in the distance, a train clatters over a railway bridge. The river rings with the scream of caulkers' grinders, metal to metal on ship's plates in the yards, and the water glitters blue with the flashes of welding. A blanket of smoke, rising from a multitude of chimneys, hangs over the city, muffling the sounds and reflecting the glow of streetlights and iron furnaces. You can taste the sulphur on your tongue.

Mary sweats beside her mother and the children at her feet in the only bed. Enclosed in the narrow space around it, the bed reeks of paraffin rubbed on the wood to kill the lice. Mick sleeps on the bare floorboards wrapped in a coat. The fire smoulders in the grate, warming the black kettle beside it. The single tap in the sink drips on to a plate smeared with jam. Under the table a mouse nibbles at breadcrumbs.

I wakes up burstin' for a pee but don't know where to go. They're still asleep too. I squeeze ma legs together but it's no use. I'll have to ask. I fling off the coat an goes to the bed.

'Missus,' I says but she doesna move. Jesus I'll have to shake her.

'Missus,' I says an touch her arm. Christ she leaps up wi' her eyes starin'.

'Who are you? What are doin' in ma hoose?'

'Mick, Missus. You said I could stay.'

‘O God aye. I forgot.’

‘Where’s the cludgie, Missus. I need a pee.’

‘Key’s by the sink there. Outside an on your left.’

I goes out to the stair and finds the cludgie. Thank God. Pee rattles on the newspaper in the cludgie. Last in here never pulled the chain. Dirty bastard.

I goes back an she’s up countin’ coins on the table.

‘Mary, get up an go an get us a plain loaf an a jar o’ jam.’

Mary pulls the curtain across the box bed so’s I can’t see her dressin’.

‘Have to keep some for the rent. Factor comes the day an I’m a week behind.’

‘I’ll give you rent, missus, if you’ll let me stay till I find ma Mam.’

‘Don’t be daft, son. How would a skelf like you pay rent?’

‘I’ll find a job.’

‘Good of you, son, but we’ll manage.’

Mary comes out an puts on her shoes. Her Ma gives her money an she goes out.

I goes after her an takes out the ten shillin’.

‘Get us ten Woodbine an two loaves an butter an jam an sausages an eggs.’

‘Wherdya get that, Mick? You stole it, didn’t ya?’

‘I did not. Ma Da gave it us.’

‘You’re a liar. I know you are.’

‘Am not. It’s mine. Go on for fuck’s sake before I take it back.’

‘They folk in the shop’ll ask where I got it.’

‘Say your Ma’s got a lodger.’

She goes down the stair. I like the way her hair bounces on her frock.

‘Don’t forget ma fags,’ I shouts down the close.

I goes back in an stands by the sink.

‘Where did you Ma stay?’ she says.

‘I can’t mind the street but I’ll know the place when I see it.’

‘Definitely in the Gorbals?’

‘Aye. I mind the bridge, the bridge you walk over.’

‘I’ll ask about for you. Somebody must know, eh? What’s she look like?’

‘Beautiful. Black hair an blue eyes an a scarf wi’ shamrocks an shoes wi’ wee bows.’

‘You’re fond o’ your Ma. Eh?’

‘Aye’

Jesus ma eyes get all wet. What a Jessie. I go an look out the window.

Mary comes back with the stuff in a bag.

‘Jesus, Mary ! Wheredya get that? You can’t get that on tick ! For God’s sake.’

‘It’s him, Ma. He gave me ten shillin’.

‘Didya, Mick?’

‘Aye. Ma Da gave it me an I’ll give you some for rent.’

‘God love you,son. A few shillin’ won’t go far. You keep that tae yersel. We’ll get by.

You can stay here till you find yer Ma. We’ll have a fry an Mary’ll take you roun’ tae Mrs Lundy in Bedford Street see if you can get a bit mattress or somethin’.’

‘No frae her, Ma. It’ll be crawlin’. I’ll get somethin’ frae ma work.’

‘Nonsense. Mrs Lundy’s stuff’s been cleaned. An don’t be takin’ anythin’ frae your work. None o’ that.’

‘Can you get me a job at your work?’ I says to Mary.

‘Don’t be daft. It’s all women. I work in the hair factory. Makin’ mattresses.’

‘Mary, get they weans ready fer the school while I make a fry.’

We’re sittin’ at the table an this priest comes to the door. Bad news. Nosey bastards they priests.

‘Good morning, Mrs Doyle. I was visiting poor Mrs Healey upstairs. Very poorly she is. I haven’t seen you at mass Mrs Doyle nor you, Mary, and I was worried for you.’

‘I’m grand thank you father. We’ll be there next Sunday.’

‘I think you said that last time I called, Mrs Doyle, and the time before that.’

‘I’ve plenty tae think about feedin’ these weans.’

‘Of course you have. But we must look after our immortal souls as well. And who is this young man? You have a lodger, Mrs Doyle?’

‘Ma cousin’s boy just visiting. No lodger father.’

‘What cousin is that now? Did I meet her at the funeral at all?’

‘No. She’s in Dundee. She couldn’t come.’

‘That’s a shame. A long way right enough. Did you come on your own, young man? What’s your name by the way?’

‘Robert, father. I came on the train.’

‘Now that’s an adventure and not cheap either.’

‘Ma Da paid.’

‘I hope you kept the ticket, son, the return ticket. You’ll still have that, eh?’

‘Aye.’

‘Father,’ says Mary, ‘I’ve tae get dressed for work and get the weans dressed for school.’

‘Of course, Mary. You’re a grand girl, looking after the children and helping your mother. I’ll go and leave you in peace. I hope I’ll see you all in Mass and you too Robert. You’ll be in the school, no doubt, so I’ll see you there. What’s your second name?’

‘O’Donnell, father.’

‘O’Donnell is it? A good Irish name that. The whole of the clan must live in the city there’s so many of them. Well, I’ll be on my way. God bless you all.’

He goes out an Mary smiles at me.

‘You’ll go the bad fire, you. O’Donnell !’

‘Will he tell about me?’

‘Naw. There’s things we could tell about him.’