

## Double Spey Cast

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The February rain was coming at him in intermittent pulses, at times with hail in it. The mobile vibrated against his chest, inside its waterproof pouch, under his many layers. He ignored it. The iphone was a Christmas present from his daughter and too complicated. "Aye, jist leave yer bit message, Ah'll git tae it whin a caan" his gruff voice would be telling them. The vibrations stopped.

Benny Toward, universally known as Wee Benny to all on the river, was seventy-eight years young, fighting his aches, denying his increasing frailty. The laird, Jimmy Brewster, was Benny's sister's son. Jimmy was away in Patagonia, fishing with his fancy pals. The Black Rock beat was free until the weekend so Benny was the boss, at least for now. It was Benny who had persuaded his nephew to invest in this stretch of river, lead the consortium, and keep Benny on as their ghillie.

Lord Brewster of Banchory, aka James Aloysius Brewster of Springburn, Glasgow, a self-made man, had retired from a meteoric career as a property developer at forty-eight years old to take up a seat in the Upper House, bought with an few appropriate donations. Jimmy was rolling in money, everyone said so and he liked to show off, spread it around. "Shady, nefarious, devious, ruthless", were words Brewster's superior 'friends' had whispered in the fishing hut, thinking Wee Benny was out of earshot, as he sat on the bench by the river with his pieces and a welcome dram, deliberately excluding himself from their inane chatter.

For the last few days the river had been in spate, murky from the rain and the snow melt, full of debris and broken branches. Now at last it was clearing, still roiling but almost fishable. A squadron of rooks, newly home from dibbing in sodden fields, was settling noisily for the night in the trees above and behind him, as the last of the afternoon light seeped away into gloom. He should be off the river, he knew that, but could sense the first of the spring salmon running through.

As his cast snaked up, out and across the width of the river, he side-stepped downstream, keeping near the bank, staying in the slower, shallower water, taking only small movements, feeling for a firm footing, mindful of the rounded boulders underfoot, and of the press of the river surging on his calves, splashing up onto his thighs.

The phone vibrated again, but only briefly, cutting almost at once to the message service. It would be Angie, his daughter, checking up on him, as she always did on weekdays, while driving home. Mrs Angela Gunn BSc (Hons), Head of Modern Studies. Angie: bossy, never wrong, taking after her mother. Since Dorothy had died two years ago his daughter had taken over as his self-appointed guardian. Benny had told her to mind her own business, told her to sort out her own life, and told her to *leave him alone*. Still Angie nagged at him, fulfilling a promise to her mother, she said. "She wants my cottage, wants me in a care home", he had heard himself whine unconvincingly, trying to make his story more real by repeating it at every opportunity.

At the end of the retrieve he straightened the tag with a flip, then made a partial false cast, and now with both hands on the rod, looped with practised ease into a Double Spey cast

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to hurl the long line upwards, watching it unfurl, tugging down at the last, causing the tip of it to straighten, causing the fly to land softly on the roiling gunmetal surface of the river.

Two seconds later the monster struck, like a collie snatching a stick. Instinctively Benny jerked his left hand down to set the hook while lifting the rod tip upwards with his right hand. The line went slack - the fish was running at him, as they often did at this spot heading upstream to the deeper water under the bridge. He reeled-in furiously, seeking to regain pressure on the fish to stop it shaking the hook from its mouth. The line was taut as the fish ran past him then the reel screamed. Benny pressed his left thumb down firmly on the rim of the drum as an added brake. Seemingly oblivious of this restraining force, the fish stripped line, powering its way upriver, heading for the depths of Black Rock pool.

As Benny twisted to face his foe his right foot skidded and his life changed forever. Now Benjamin Jonathan Toward was outside himself, observing his predicament unfold in slow motion. He should have saved himself, he should have let go his rod: he knew that well enough.

"Gentl'men, thurs plentae mair fishies in the sea but only wan o' youse. So, if push comes tae shuv, save yersels, right? Jist let the roddie go and git yersel back ontae the bank. Aye, an' thurs plentae deep pools aroond hereabouts, and 'member, ye can droon yersel in aa cup ae waater, right? Ha, ha, ha."

This was the first part of his soliloquy, delivered afresh at the start of each day to his guests, at the insistence of Brewster.

Habit, ingrained over forty-eight years as a ghillie, now ruled Benny Toward. The small man went down slowly, almost theatrically, first onto his right knee, usually his better leg. As he sought to push himself upright, his left foot skidded.

'**Bastart!**', he yelled out in agony as the tendon snapped. He fell first onto his arse and his left elbow, immersing his head and shoulders in the icy water, losing his thick spectacles and deerstalker, but keeping his right arm almost vertical, still holding the rod tip upright. His left hand moved from the reel to shove against the river bed. At once the reel began to roar as the fish stripped backing line freely. The mobile vibrated, again briefly, flashing a subliminal message, telling him to let go the rod and pull at the red toggle on his life-jacket. Semi-submerged, head down, his right arm twisted grotesquely to maintain the rod upright, he still refused to let up on his adversary. The water reached the auto-inflate valve and his life-jacket exploded, making him buoyant. The pressure of the fish on the line rotated him onto his back. He was out in the middle of the river, in the fastest part, travelling backwards, rod tip upwards, scrabbling for the reel knob with his left hand while trying in vain to stand up, gain a foothold. Behind him Pulpit Rock raced out of the gloom. He struck it headfirst: only then did the rod slip from his grasp.

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Angela Gunn hated driving in the dark and was travelling at a steady twenty-eight miles per hour, her wipers at full speed, with an aggressive half-mile conga hard on her tail.

'Jon, has Gramps got back to you?'

'No, Mum, but don't worry. He'll be asleep in front of the fire. Who would go out in this? And look, it's nearly dark.'

'I'm going back to see if he's in the cottage.'

'Christ's sake, Mum, I've got football training tonight, you know that.'

'Watch your language, Jonathan Gunn. Remember who you're speaking to.'

'But Mum, it's important. Mr Riley said if I was late again he'd drop me.'

'Don't worry about Matt Riley, I'll have a word. I think you'll find I have some influence in that department.'

Jon smiled thinking, so it *is* true.

Angela spotted a turn-off to the right coming up ahead. If she missed this chance, it would be miles to the next one. She decided to go for it.

'Mum, are you two, you and Mr Riley, are you. . .'

Without indicating she hauled on the steering wheel, cutting across the oncoming traffic.

The huge articulated lorry trundling towards them blared its bass horn and lit up like a Christmas tree, missing them by millimetres as they slewed across its path onto the dark farm track.

'**CHRIST MUM!** Fuck's sake. Hell's bells.'

'Sorry, I thought I had more of a gap.'

'Jee-sus! Time to visit Specsavers, eh?'

Angela Gunn stood on the brakes, slithered to a halt. She needed time to think, to regain her equanimity. She closed her eyes, removed her bifocals, breathed on them, and rubbed them on the sleeve of her blouse.

'Right, Jon, just a thought. Pass me my iPad. Do you know how to work that App - "Find an iPhone"?'

'Yeah, let me do it. Hold on, **wait**. No, Mum, let me do it. Yeah, yeah, gottim! Here he is. What's Gramps doing there, at Upper Drum? He must be visiting their ghillie, what's his name. No, **CHRIST MUM!** Look at the speed he's moving at. God, Mum, he must be in the river. Hell's bells. Look!'

'Right, you call the police, Jon, OK? We'll go to Peterculter Golf Club, see if we can get someone to help us.'

'No, Mum, the police will never believe me, not after that last time, with the fake reindeer escape. And don't start up again! It was supposed to be a joke, you know, for Christmas. **You**

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call them, they'll believe you. Let me drive. Tell them we'll go to Milltimber instead, OK? We can get right next the river with the car at Milltimber. Keep watching the iPad, OK.'

'No, Jon, you've only got a provisional.'

'Yeah, Mum, but you're in the car with me, right? Anyway, I'm already way better at driving than you, right?'

They swapped sides and Jon rammed the seat back to fit his long legs.

'Milltimber, here we come!'

'Yes, Milltimber's better, go for it. And I'll phone Matt, he lives quite near there. But first I'll call the police.'

*"Hello, it's an emergency. There is an elderly man in the river, he's my father . . ."*

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'Angie, over here.'

Matt's torch flashed at them and they stumbled forwards over the rough ground.

The distant undulating whine of an ambulance raced towards them as a police jeep lurched to a halt beside Angie's Clio and Matt's Fiesta. The big vehicle's blue light was spinning out a beacon, its hazard lights shuddering a warning. Its array of roof-bar lights were shining onto the riverbank. Most police patrols in the valley had received river rescue training and equipment, because of recruitment problems at Fire and Rescue.

'Look Matt, according to my iPad, Dad should be here any minute.'

Matt scanned his torch upriver. In the far distance the beam glinted on reflective strips moving towards them. Matt waded out from the bank, skidded, plumped down on his backside, stood up and moved again towards the onrushing bundle.

'STOP, sir!' shouted the policewoman. 'Come back to the bank at once, please. We are trained for this. Thanks. Now quick, you two anchor this line and get ready to pull, OK? Here, son, you hold this one with me. Right Brendan, off you go, laddie.'

Brendan Tomley, a local man and keen fisherman, waded out slowly, moving warily, feeling carefully for each foothold. He was wearing a bright yellow life preserver with a fluorescent line attached, anchored by Jon and the Sergeant Sabani Singh. Brendan cast ahead using a telescopic pole. At its tip was a floppy man-sized loop. A separate line attached to the handle of the pole ran to the bank, this line anchored by Matt and Angie. At a point an arm's length short of this loop was a large fluorescent plastic hook. At the third flail the hook snagged, held firm. Matt and Angie hauled the sodden bundle ashore, the policeman supporting Benny's head, holding it above the water.

Onshore, the policewoman immediately arranged Benny in the recovery position, began her first aid routine. Two minutes later the ambulance arrived and the para-medics took over.

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'Mrs Angela Gunn, right? You are the daughter?' Angie nodded. 'What medications does your father take?'

She aped her father's standard riposte, "Only medicinal whisky, in any given amount."

After a check of his vital functions, they injected adrenaline and applied an oxygen mask.

'How is Dad, please?'

'Touch and go. Hypothermia's the main worry. Are you coming with us? We may need authority for any procedures. He may need his stomach pumped.'

'Yes, eh, should I follow in my car?'

'No, best if you come in the ambulance, OK?'

Matt looped his long arm around Angie's waist, gave her a hug. 'You go on my love, go with your dad, and don't worry, we'll manage, right Jon?'

The ambulance pulled away, its siren sounding as it forced its way out onto the busy road and through the rush-hour traffic towards Aberdeen Royal Infirmary.

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Sitting in the BMW X5 the policeman noted names, addresses, telephone numbers and what was known of the circumstances of the incident. Like most local men, Brendan Tomley was an occasional fisherman and knew Wee Benny by repute, although he had never actually met the legend. Thankfully this rescue had not produced a corpse, at least not yet, although the ambulance driver had whispered, "Looks to me like he's a goner. There's no' a pick on 'im".

With Matt and Jon decanted, and the BMW having made off, they were left with two cars and one driver.

'Look, Mr Riley, I've got the keys. I could drive Mum's car to your place, if you like.'

'No, Jon. Nice try, but no. You've only got a provisional licence, yes? We'll have to leave it here, till we get your mum back.'

'Yeah, I get it. Mr Riley, is there still football training tonight?'

'Let me see.' The man checked his watch. 'Yes, why not? We can grab a bite at my place. Get your gear and lock up the Clio; we'll sort it out later, OK?'

'Mr Riley, are you and my Mum, well, you know?'

'Does that bother you, Jon?'

'No, no. It's cool, actually. But does Dad know?'

'Yes, your Mum has spoken to him. We were waiting on the right time to discuss it with you.'

'So, I take it that Dad is out of the picture for good now?'

'No, not for you he isn't, just for your Mum, I hope.'

'Ah, right, I get it. Did you know that Dad has a boyfriend?'

'Yes, I had heard. But that's his business.'

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'It made Gramps really angry when he discovered, you know, Dad going off with Uncle Jimmy, him being a Lord and all that.'

'Takes all sorts, Jon. So long as they make each other happy, that's the main thing, eh? Non-judgmental is the way ahead, eh? Now, I need a shower and a change out of these wet togs. I bet you're hungry too, eh?'

'Yeah, hungry as a horse!'

'Come on, we'll need to scoot to be on time for training.'

'Mr Reilly, do you have oven chips at yours, by any chance?'

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The BMW informed Control they were heading to Banchory police station to get Brendan warmed up and changed.

'Sabani, I heard that Wee Benny was always saying that his daughter was trying to get rid of him, get him into a care home, so that she could get his place. Black Rock Cottage, it's called. It's well hidden from the road, just right for us, I would say.'

'Brendan, do you think she did it, Angie, threw him in? Or maybe the boyfriend?'

'Unlikely. Why try to rescue him? And from those addresses they're pretty well set up already, eh?'

'If it comes on the market, Brendan, do you think it would suit us? Maybe we could just squeeze them a wee bit, call in the sympathy vote, from the rescue, that sort of idea?'

'Well, maybe, let's wait till the old guy pegs out; then wait a wee bit before we make our move, what do you think? It's small, so you might be able to afford it. Someone told me it's been fully modernized by the laird, all mod cons. And it has a great view of the river in both directions, near the old railway bridge, right on a long slow bend. Maybe free fishing for me, eh?'

'Fishing? Do you go fishing?'

'Look, Sabani, if you turn off left at the next road we can go down and look at it, what do you think?'

'Good idea. Right, I'll tell Control we are just checking up that it's secure, check if there might be someone there who needs to know of the rescue, that sort of idea. But will you be OK, Brendan, you're not too cold?'

'Naw, for God's sake girl, remember, I spend hours standing in rivers, don't I?'

'So **that's** what you tell Evelyn, is it? That you're out fishing in all weathers when you're round at mine?'

'Something like that, I have a few variations, ha, ha, ha.'

*"Control, this is Sergeant Sabani Singh with PC Brendan Tomley. We are approaching the cottage of Benjamin. . ."*

'Next left, sweetie, down that track.'

'Christ, this is steep!'

'Just take it easy, let the technology do the job, *vorsprung durch technik*, and all that.'



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'True, true. Yeah, that's better. Do you know Brendan? I read in a magazine that Eskimos are the most virile men in the world, because they keep always keep their testicles cold.'

'Huh, who knows, maybe I should get back to fishing again, eh?'

'Who knows, maybe there is a nice double bed down there, eh?'

'OH FOR FUCK'S - where the fuck's the road. . .'

The heavy car juddered forwards, its anti-lock brakes ineffectual as the earth crumbled below its wheels causing it to tip into the void, gravity accelerating it towards the river, 35 metres below.

As the car struck the eponymous Black Rock, the thunder cracked overhead and the sleet turned to a continual downpour, causing the river to rise rapidly, threatening to burst its banks. It was three days before the BMW was located and recovered.

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Benny survived his "wee dooking", as he called it. Two weeks after his dice with death, helped by his first ever intake of antibiotics, he eventually fought off double pneumonia.

Angela contacted her cousin and asked for his help.

Now in a care home, Benny awaits a new left knee.

Meanwhile, Wee Benny has acquired a motability scooter and several ladyfriends happy to listen to his ghillie tales.

His costs are being covered by his nephew, Jimmy, Lord Brewster of Banchory.

Black Rock Cottage is currently rented to a middle-aged couple from Essex with two collies and no children. The man is on trial as the new ghillie; his wife hopes to rear rare breed sheep. Unknown to Wee Benny, Lord Brewster still owns the cottage: Jimmy only pretended to gift the cottage to his uncle, a lie to please his mother.

ooOoo

In time the Coroner wrote:

"Perhaps it was a mercy that the police vehicle hit the eponymous 'Black Rock' head on, killing the occupants instantly, sparing them the horrors of drowning in the deepest part of the river. We have been advised that the river was in spate - clearly unfishable."