

Fragments (February 1964)

It was a cold and dull Sunday in February. I am sure I was sixteen so it was 1964. I was an apprentice Marine Plumber at Stephen of Linthouse, Shipbuilders, and rode my bike to work each day - rain, hail or shine.

That morning I was alone in our compact two-bedroomed ground floor tenement apartment at 22 Kilvaxter Drive in Arden on the south side of Glasgow, a Scottish Special Housing Association estate created as part of the slum clearance programme.

My father, a joiner, was off on his bike to a building site to work overtime, or so I thought. He was always willing to work overtime, two nights and a Saturday and Sunday if it was on offer.

I was alone but I was used to this. My mother and father had separated in June 1962, taking two of my brothers with her, leaving my youngest brother Brian (soon to be four): "To keep you company, Johnny".

These separations normally lasted a few weeks but on this occasion it had lasted nearly three years. Unusually, I had remained in Arden with my father. On every previous bust up, I had gone off into the night with my mother, usually nursing a black eye, split lip or bleeding nose, her punishment for the debts she had built up since the last shouting argument. These rows were always about the debts my mother had incurred.

This time, aged nearly fourteen, I stayed put. The truth of the matter is it was about a girl I fancied. I had arranged to meet her the next day on the bus home from school at Shawlands Academy. Of course that never happened. Next morning I was detailed off to look after Brian when my father went off to work. A few months later Brian was taken to Fife, to stay with my paternal grandparents.

In fact, my hoped for meeting with the girl never happened. I never met her again. Thinking back, I cannot remember her name but it was something fancy, exotic, like 'Yvonne'. What I do remember was she was an only child with nice clothes and lived in the 'Jenny Lind' houses near Spiersbridge, four-in-a-block terraces, a vast step up from Arden.

Living alone with my father during the years that followed, I learned a lot about him I had not understood before. I knew that during WW2 he had been in the submarine service for six years from age eighteen and was suffering from PTSD, not openly discussed at that time. Although he never talked about the bad times he had endured, he was still haunted by nightmares twenty years on. Some nights, lying alone in our

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separate bedrooms at Kilvaxter Drive, I could hear him talking to himself and sometimes weeping softly.

In this very basic tenement property, the only heating was an open fire in the living room, lit only in the evenings, when we could afford coal. My father used to bring scraps of wood home in a bundle which we used as a substitute fuel. All other rooms were unheated, including the bathroom. For most of the year I was always well wrapped up, even indoors. We had a small electric heater used in the kitchenette for half-an-hour while we wolfed down breakfast and prepared our pieces and tea caddy tins for the mid-morning and lunch breaks at work.

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On that dreary Sunday morning, my day started with a forage to buy a loaf, Stork margarine and a lump of cheese. The grocery and newsagents outlet was part of a recent shopping precinct, run by a cheery couple and their son Dennis. As part of a large gaggle from Arden, Dennis used to travel with us to Pollokshaws for schooling because they had 'thrown up' the houses in Arden without shops, schools or churches. Dennis had been in my class until primary two but was held back because he was 'slow'. When I reached primary five, Dennis had vanished from my life, no longer attending Sir John Maxwell school. In the playground they said Dennis had been sent to a 'special' school.

When I returned from the shop, I wrote down the items I had purchased and their price, adding the sum, then deducting it from the original amount, placing the change in the biscuit tin and hiding it again in the larder. We had never been burgled but my father had become wary because with just two of us living in the ground floor house and both of us often out, he thought we were a 'target'.

After breakfast I decided to go for a walk even though it was a dreich February day with spits of rain in the air. I checked and none of my pals were interested in joining me. This outing was a sort of experiment because my father often went for walks in the evenings. My mother had said "he needed to be alone to relax".

With only a vague plan, I set off in the general direction of the Patterton farm where my father had done jobbing work during a lean spell in the construction industry when there was no overtime available.

This had been five or so years earlier, long before my parent's most recent separation.

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My father's tales from this part-time employment at the farm were oft repeated, no doubt refined in the retellings:

"Johnny, the first time I went calling on the farmer, I dismounted from my bike and walked the last bit into the open farmyard. Without warning I was smacked to the ground by a huge Alsatian who pinned me down with his face next to mine, growling.

"I shouted for help and a wee boy of about six came out of a door and peered over us.'

"Whit's yer name and whit's yer business, Mister."

I told him I wanted to speak to his father about any joinery repair work he might need doing.'

"He's no' here the noo. Ah'll git ma mither."

The dog remained, its paws on my chest, snarling in my face and growling menacingly.

A tall thin woman wearing a grubby dark grey working coat came at her son's heels.

"Whit's yer name and whit's yer business, Mister."

"I'm Jack Bonthron, from Arden. I'm a time-served joiner. I was hoping you have some joinery work needing doing."

She leaned down, grabbed the dog by his collar.

"Come awaa' Caesar. Back intae yer kennil wi' ye and leave the mannie alane."

'Reluctantly, the big dog trailed his chain back to his kennel and peered out at us. I would learn later that the chain stretched only three-quarters way across the entryway so that the postie and other regulars could get past him without being floored.'

"Right, mister, come wi' me," said the woman. "An' Gordie, awaa ben the hoose an turn aff the gas on the oven and ruckle up the coals on the fire and fill the water kettle and set it ower the coals, there's a good lad."

"But Mam, Ah want tae come and see whit Jack's gonnae dae fur ye'."

"Well, dae whit yer telt first then come."

The boy ran indoors and I followed the woman through an outbuilding into a yard then into a second rickety outbuilding inhabited by hundreds of hens. There were a few eggs lying around in corners. It was chaos.

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"Now, Mister what I need is fur ye' tae fix this place up an' maak it waatertight, hen tight and fox proof. Is that something ye can dae fur me?"

"Yes, but it'll take quite a while. Maybe I could do a first section and see if you're happy with it then work on the next section and so on. You know, by instalments."

"Right, Ah like yer way o' thinking. When can ye start?"

"Will I be supplying all the materials or would you like me to prepare a list for you to order?"

"Which way would be cheapest? Could you no' jist do it all by yersel?"

"I can't afford the outlay and you won't want to pay me in advance since you don't know me. So, here's what I suggest. I could order the timber lengths and wire mesh at the builder's merchant and you could pay the driver when he delivers. I'll bring the smaller bits and pieces like nails, hinges and brackets and charge these to you in my final bill."

"Sounds tae me like you've done this afore."

"Yes, I built a garage for a Doctor one time and that's how we organised it."

"When could ye start?"

"Well, this is Fair Saturday. I'm off for the next two weeks for Glasgow Fair. The merchants are closed today and tomorrow and on Fair Monday. But I could start tomorrow making a first start, clearing away and taking measurements and so on, discussing what you want and go to the merchants first thing on Tuesday before I come here.'

"Right, let's do it. I'm Mamie Kilbride an' whit's yer name agin?"

"Jack Bonthron."

She held out her hand and we shook on the deal.

When Alec her husband came back later in the week he was not pleased to find his wife had employed me but, as I knew by that stage, the 'hens and eggs' were *her* business, not his.'

"The thing is Johnny, Alec Kilbride was not half as bright as his wife. But, when he got used to me, he kept me going for over two years, what with one thing and another. He also taught me a lesson. The first job he gave me was to repair a cowshed doorway. It was awkward and involved a lot of new hinges and brackets and a few heavy posts which I carried out to the farm on the crossbar of my bike, you know, sticking out in front and

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at the back. I worked from Friday night through 'till late on Sunday then when I added up what he owed me, I kept rounding it down because I could sense he would be loath to pay out what I felt was due me. And sure enough, he haggled it down and I agreed to knock off five shillings. After that, I gave him a bill for every day's work and materials, making a series of smaller bills. He always wanted a sixpence off the bill but I made sure I had some bounce in the cost to cover that and under this new method, we got along just fine.'

"I never had a minute's trouble getting paid by his wife but I know she kept a close eye on me too, bringing cups of tea and scones and checking what I was doing, making suggestions. And Gordie their son was like my shadow, waiting for me each day when I arrived on my bike and tacking along with me as my apprentice, just like you used to do when you were his age."

"Didn't he get a nail stuck in his hand?"

"Yes. One day when I arrived, I could hear him crying. Mamie was really upset but trying not to show it. It was awkward because he had been using an old mallet of his father's to hammer two bits of wood together using an old rusty nail and his hand was attached by the nail to a long plank of old wood with the point of the nail bent over underneath. I had to use my junior hacksaw to cut off the head of the nail to free his hand. Then Mamie drove him in her wee egg delivery van to the hospital where they treated it. It turns out the farmer could not stand the sight of human blood."

"Dad, what about the time you were left to do the milking?"

"Oh, yes, the Colraines from Galloway. Charlie and Sally. They had five kids, three boys and two girls all under ten years old. They lived on a farm cottage. They were dirt poor. I repaired their roof for free. They had an outside toilet and a jaw box inside with an outside tap. I got a plumber I was working with to put in a cold tap over the sink but all their cooking and water heating was done on a coal-fired range. They had no electricity and no gas and used paraffin lamps at night."

"I remember they used to come to us on a Sunday afternoon."

"Yes, your Mum took pity on them and every other Sunday they came here to Arden in their old jalopy with the kids. They were like tinkers, filthy and ragged. We filled the bath to the brim three times over while your mother washed their clothes and gave them hand me downs for the kids. We fed them too. They sat glued to the old tele your Aunt Margaret gave us. Your mum got an old radio for them and a battery which Mamie charged up for them."

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"Dad, remember the time you milked the cows for a week."

"Yes, it was Glasgow Fair. The farmer gave the Colraines a week off and they went off in their old car, back to Galloway. I had helped Charlie a few times, washing the cows' teats and connecting them up to the milking machine while they ate hay from their feeders."

"Dad, remember the first day?"

"Yes, your Mum had bought me a brand-new pair of bib and brace overalls. I was wearing my wellies because of the dung. I stood in front of the milking shed door and shouted 'HALOOO! HALOOO!' just like Charlie and they came towards me. I tried to direct the first one into the first stall. I had not realised each cow had its own stall. The next two cows breenged past me and butted me over onto the floor. I was lucky not to get stood upon. When I got to my feet I was covered in glaur and the new overalls had been christened."

"And the bull, remember that?"

"Yes, the bull was hired in. He was called Victor, a huge black beast. He was kept in a tight box room with a noose through the ring on his nose to tether him. The farmer sent me in to muck him out, change his straw. Victor took a dislike to me. I think he sensed my fear. Anyway, he kicked out, missed me but trapping me against the wall. I edged into the corner to stop being crushed. I couldn't get to the door. He was bellowing and kicking and trying to stab at me with his horns. I thought I was a goner. Eventually Gordie came. He had a stick and he whacked Victor on his nose and got me free."

"I told the farmer later and he laughed and said:

"Aye, he's mair than a wee bit flighty that yin, Ah'll allow ye that. Jist lee him tae starve himsel fur a day an' Gordie'll gie ye a wee haund wi' it tamorra."

There were other tales my father told us.

Like the time he was riding his bike to work one frosty morning and a bus came up behind him, crawling along. Dad skidded on an icy patch and the bus driver slammed on his brakes.

Dad had jumped clear and was standing on the pavement but his bike was under the bus.

The driver got out and asked:

"He's no' deed, is he?"

"No, I'm okay. It's my bike you've run over. I jumped clear."

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Recovered, the bike was undamaged and Dad and the driver shook hands and carried on their separate ways with my father on the pavement most of the rest of his journey to his building site.

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I did not have a watch but I felt as if it was about two o'clock in the afternoon. I stood on the hill on the edge of the treeline looking down onto Patterton farm. There was no activity below just smoke from three chimneys.

I turned away and wandered on with a vague notion of trying to find the dams of the Gorbals Waterworks. There were sheep about, a few with lambs. As I approached, they skittered away. I pressed on and remembered a time I had been near here with an older boy called Finlay. He had a trout fishing rod and I went with him to the dams after work, to fish with a bubble float and three flies, hoping to snag smallish brown trout on the evening rise.

One night, making our way home in the near pitch black of a cloudy August night and being attacked by millions of midgies, we reached a low wall. We stood up on it and jumped, dropping about ten feet onto a flock of sheep cooied in against the base of the wall, settled for the night. The sheep scattered, bleating and baah-ing like banshees.

Afterwards we laughed it off but at the time it was scary.

On that bitterly cold afternoon, as I wandered on, I began to feel I was not alone.

Standing in the middle of a large sloping field, I stopped and checked behind me several times over but could not see anyone.

Looking towards the sunset, I watched the reds, golds and purples of the sun setting on the far horizon. As the sun glimmered below the horizon I heard a low bellow and looked towards it. A sizeable herd of cows was making its way towards me. As they got closer, they started to run and I turned away, heading downhill. They started to complain more loudly and I glanced behind.

STAMPEDE!

I remembered my father telling me that cows are very curious and quite clever but that most breeds have poor distance vision.

The faster I ran, the closer they were each time I looked. I spotted a gate and when I reached it I leapt up in a Western Roll and straddled over it, dropping to the far side

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and safety as they stood bellowing in the field, complaining loudly, their breath steaming in great clouds. Later, my father explained they were expecting me to feed them.

It was very dark. I scanned around and saw a track heading downhill. In the distance I could see a light and the outline of the farm.

From the hedge beside me a voice said:

'Hello Johnny Bonthron, it's me Dennis. You didn't spot me, did you? I've been following you, like Tonto from the tele.'

'Dennis, why are you away out here? Does your Mum know? She'll be worried about you.'

But it was good to have company. As we made our way back home, skirting the farm to get back to the main road, Dennis told me about his goldfish tank and his hamster.

When we arrived at his house, his Mum was angry at me but when I explained and Dennis confirmed my story, she gave me a hug and told me to wait while she fetched me a packet of digestive biscuits as a treat.

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When I reached home my father was in the kitchenette making a fry up; bacon, eggs, sausages, potato scones and beans. There was a huge pile of buttered toast. It was like Christmas morning.

As we were eating, he told me the BIG NEWS.

"Johnny, I've been to see your Mum and the three boys. They have a room and kitchen in Coplaw Street, just round the corner from Granny Bremner. We've decided to give up this place in Arden. We'll move in with her. I've been making bunk beds, wide ones. You can share with Brian. Ricky and Dougie will be on the top bunk."

"Dad, I don't want to go back to all that arguing and well, you know."

"Look, Johnny, we have sorted our differences and worked out a plan to clear your Mum's debts. Getting a divorce and having to support two households is just unaffordable. Only rich people can get divorced, it's impossible for the ordinary working man. It'll be alright and it will be nearer to your work at Stephen's of Linthouse, won't it?"

"Dad, I really don't want to go back to my old life. I like it here with just the two of us."

"Johnny, it's not up for debate. We're going to see them tomorrow night. Your Mum is making a meal for us. Mince and tatties with dumplings and peas. And a nice soup to start, OK?"