

# The Dams

*'The Dams' includes snippets from my memories, interlinked stories which seem as fresh now as they were when I was fourteen, more than six decades ago. The time has come to set them down as written versions for others to read but first here is some essential background.*

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My parents had separated in June 1961 and I lived alone with my father for a few years until we were re-united.

Dad was a joiner, a dogged hard-worker who spent his married life on construction sites all over the West of Scotland, on one occasion riding his bike to Greenock two hours in each direction, chasing overtime, two nights a week and Saturdays and Sundays, trying to earn enough to pay the bills for his wife and four sons.

On the morning of my story he went off into the freezing darkness around seven o'clock not due back until teatime. I was living in Arden <sup>1</sup> at 22 Kilvaxter Drive, in a small two bedroomed flat. It was freezing cold, like living in an igloo.

I was in third year at Shawlands Academy, in Class 3B4. My favourite subjects were Physics and English, mainly because I liked the teachers. Prior to the split up of the family I seldom did homework and often skipped the afterschool homework classes. Another constraint was my younger brothers, who had trailed after me as their minder.

After the family split I had more space and time to myself and on a few occasions I did submit homework for History and Geography and got reasonable reports. Truth be told, prior to the split I escaped from family pressures by reading, mainly library books and my Mum's magazines such as *The Woman's Realm*, *The Woman's Own*, *The Peoples' Friend* and compendium books of edited Readers Digest stories borrowed from the library.

Although we had an ancient hand-me-down TV with a nine inch screen, the black and white images were faded, shaky, not worth watching.

I would be fifteen in June 1962 but there was no talk of me staying on beyond my birthday. The following year the school leaving age would rise to sixteen which, truth be told, had I buckled down to studying, this extra year might have changed the course of my life entirely.

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<sup>1</sup> Arden was built for Glasgow Corporation as an SSHA housing estate to provide accommodation for the Glasgow slum clearance programme, creating hundreds of tenements thrown together at speed. These houses were shoddily built to a cheapskate design and severely lacking in insulation. The particular block where I lived was so bad it was eventually knocked down and replaced years later.

*If you need to know more about this substandard new-build flat, read my story called 'Moving On'.*

# The Dams

It was a Sunday morning, early in February 1962. I was free to choose what to do.

With the snippets set out below swirling in my head, an idea implanted itself and I decided to go for a walk, out beyond Patterton Farm and across to 'The Dams' (the reservoirs which supplied the Gorbals Waterworks). As this core tale develops, to provide context, I will digress to other tales.

DIGRESS? So unlike me!

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## ***A Winter Walk:***

After Dad left, I lay in bed fully dressed under heaps of blankets and read the final chapters of a novel. It could have been *White Fang* by Jack London. When I reached its end, I made slices of toasted cheese, drank a pot of tea then set off with the vague notion of visiting 'The Dams' (Gorbals Waterworks).

Findlay had told me that people still fished there in winter although it was the spawning season. He said the fish were hungrier and easier to catch although they might taste strange.

## ***A digression, Findlay and Trout Fishing:***

In August 1961, now free of my big brother role, I fell under the benevolent spell of a kindly older boy called Findlay who lived a few tenement closes away. He had access to his father's old fishing gear and he took me in tow across a series of farmers' fields to The Dams where for a few weeks in August we fished most evenings from twilight until it was fully dark, hoping for wild brown trout. Findlay had stressed this was against the rules but not once did we see a Ranger or Policeman. The bigger risk was being spotted by farmers who might set their dogs on us for trespassing.

We employed a form of fly fishing using a spinning reel, three flies tied on droppers of gut with maggots on them. This fly cast was then hurled out as far as possible using a bubble float. Truth be told, we were seldom successful but very occasionally Findlay would snag a fish and if we managed to land it by dragging it out of the water onto the grassy bank to 'dunt it on the nut' with a stone, we were ecstatic.

All around us in the dark we could hear the unseen voices of older boys and men cursing their luck good or bad. From these voices I judged they were clearly much more successful than us. Or perhaps they were pretending, "bigging themselves up", as Findlay claimed.

# The Dams

I'll leave this fishing exploits thread for now and return to it later.

Now another digression.

## ***Patterton Farm:***

Here is another different thread, needed to explain my winter walk experience.

About five years earlier, possibly 1957, there had been a slump in building construction which meant projects with overtime were non-existent. My Dad responded by riding out on his bike to a nearby farm and offering his services as a joiner cum handyman.

I think his first visit to Patterton Farm was probably in the spring, probably March 1957. After a discussion and some measurements taken by my father, The Farmer set Dad a challenge of urgent repairs to be completed over the following weekend. During the ensuing week Dad bought and 'acquired' the timber, nails, brackets and so on which he envisaged he would need.

Over that first weekend he worked at a steady pace from early evening on Friday to late on Sunday evening. On completion he wrote out a detailed schedule of hours with his hourly rate and list of consumables with costs. On looking at it The Farmer balked at the sum and after a hassle paid up with Dad agreeing a discount for The Farmer in return for a promise of further work for my father over the weeks to come.

I remember Dad saying:

"Johnny, I learned my lesson. I had already trimmed my costs to the bone, wary of putting him off with a large bill for the three days' work but after that I took a different approach, presenting my bills to him on a daily basis. I could see he liked that, delving into his trouser pocket for a handful of spondoolucks (loose coins) and counting out my payment slowly and to the penny. On the first weekend he had flashed a wallet stuffed with notes but I soon learned he hated parting with them. Then, over time, I gradually rounded up my bills and within a month was earning reasonable money."

After a few weeks, Dad got lucky.

Isobel, The Farmer's wife ran a separate business from a dilapidated henhouse raising broilers for the pot and selling eggs to the guy who came to collect the milk from The Farmer's cows. Isobel had her own money. She asked The Farmer if I could do work for her. Dad said she was a tough cookie and had her own ideas but after a bit of to-ing and fro-ing they got along fine and she paid on the nail without a quibble, usually rounding it up to the nearest shilling, delighted that at long last she could expand her mini-empire.

# The Dams

Dad would tell us what was going on at the farm and it was as if we were part of it. Like a version of *The Archers*.

We heard about this next dramatic instalment later on the evening of the day it happened. It must have been a Saturday, I think.

Isobel's son was called Tommy, aged four. An active scallywag who was 'indulged' by both his mother and father. Nothing was too good for Tommy. He had toys and books galore but he was only interested in running around and getting up to mischief.

On the day of Tommy's accident The Farmer was away somewhere in his big fancy jeep.

Out in the rough field beyond the henhouse, Tommy was running after the chooks (young chickens) and tripped. He landed on a strip of fencing and his palm was stabbed through by a bent and rusty nail attached to a long strip of timber. Dad came to the rescue.

While Isobel held Tommy's hand firmly under a running tap, Dad used pliers to hold the nail as if in a vice and gently sawed through the nail with a small hacksaw to free Tommy's hand before using the pliers to ease out the remaining shard of rusty nail. Isobel doused the wound with Iodine then wrapped Tommy's hand in a bandage soaked in Dettol then drove off with him in the tractor to The Victoria Infirmary where Tommy was treated. Within a week the wee boy was back to his old self.

Dad was now in a different position, a trusted person who was treated with warmth and kindness by Isobel and grudging respect by The Farmer.

There is another thread to the Patterton Farm tale.

On the farm there was a Byreman called Bennie O'Hara and his wife Jean and two sons called Micky (Michael, aged 8) and Josie (Joseph, aged 6). Over time Dad learned they were from New Luce in Galloway although they were originally from County Donegal and had eloped when Jean was in the family way.

Bennie's job was to milk the cows twice a day. At that time The Farmer had around fifty milkers but only twenty four milking stalls requiring three batches to be organised at the gate, a task which Bennie achieved by instilling fear in the animals using a long riding crop and a snappy collie-corgi cross mongrel called Dan Dare.

The O'Haras lived in a two-roomed tumble down farm cottage. Their roof leaked and the house was damp, a hovel. Jean cooked and heated water on a coal-fired range with a cold tap and jawbox sink which discharged to a gutter and a soakaway. They had an outhouse WC and used a communal bucket for nights which Jean saved to 'water' her vegetables, a habit brought with her from Donegal.

# The Dams

They had a tiny rickety black car which they used to take the boys to school in Pollokshaws, (St Convill's), for a weekly shop and, very occasionally to the Pollokshaws Public Washhouse and Swimming Pool where they rented a bathing cubicle with a huge bath and endless hot running water.

Over these first weeks, Dad helped Bennie to make the roof and walls watertight. This led to a warm friendship. My Mum was a generous and kindly person and through Dad she extended an invitation for the O'Haras to come to us on Sunday nights to use our bathroom to wash and eat a meal with us. This routine established itself and Jean would bring us vegetables which Mum kindly accepted but never used because of the 'watering' from the night bucket.

On the runup to the Glasgow Fair holiday in July, a three-way negotiation between The Farmer, Bennie and my father resulted in Dad becoming a stand-in Byreman for Bennie while he took his family off to New Luce for a week.

On the first day on his own, Dad was wearing new bib and brace overalls Mum had bought him. He called the cows to the gate and then the fun began. The cows were confused because Bennie and Dan Dare were absent. They jostled towards Dad who tried to direct the leader into the first milking stall but she ignored him, pushing past to reach her 'own' stall, knocking Dad to the ground. Fortunately he was only bruised but covered in cow muck. Isobel heard the commotion and came to his rescue and helped him organise the herd into its three groups and milking went ahead. Over time both the cows and Dad learned this new system and all was well.

"Johnny, I learned that cows are clever animals, very clever. You have to work with them, not against them."

Another potentially fatal incident occurred when Dad was trying to muck out the stall where the hired-in Bull was being housed.

"Johnny, that Bull knew I was frightened. It had a ring on its nose and was tied on a long rope to a ring on the wall. I thought I had enough room to get round behind it with the rake but it backed up and trapped me in a corner with its backside, trying to squeeze me to death. It was Tommy who saw what was happening and he ran for The Farmer who rescued me."

The Farmer had four Clydesdales which he used to plough fiends to grow turnips as winter cattle feed. Dad seemed to be better with horses than with cows and always took old apples with him to give them.

One Saturday morning he took me to Patterton Farm as his helper. I was keen to see the place and knew I would see Micky and Josie and get a chance to throw a stick for Dan

# The Dams

Dare. We arrived on our bikes, Dad's festooned with two makeshift panniers filled with materials and long pieces of timber tied onto the crossbar sticking out front and back.

As we approached the main yard, Dad reminded me about Buster their guard dog, a huge hairy black coated Alsatian/Labrador cross, who was tethered to the wall beside his kennel. On Dad's first visit Buster had raced across and felled Dad in silence, then stood over him barking and growling until The Farmer had appeared.

Walking in file with Dad leading, we edged along the side wall on the far side away from the kennel. Buster ran towards us, jerked to a standstill by his chain, barking and snarling at me, the stranger. Dad talked to Buster and offered a bit of carrot from his pocket. Buster calmed down and went back to his kennel.

At this point The Farmer appeared with Dandelion, (one of the Clydesdales), leading her on a halter. I was introduced and Dad and The Farmer began to talk about the work Dad was planning to tackle that day. Dandelion dropped her head and started to eat a turnip from the pile outside her stall. When The Farmer saw what she was doing he exploded with rage, whipping her neck with the free end of the halter and cursing at her for 'stealing'. It was a scary few minutes with Dandelion rearing up and trying to break free and the other Clydesdales adding cries of fear and alarm from their stalls.

I was stunned by the violence of The Farmer and realised he was a man to avoid, a memory which haunted me every time I was in the vicinity of Patterton Farm.

Returning to my fishing exploits at The Dams with Findlay, you will recall that he always took me across farmer's fields, sometimes trudging through fields of barley or whatever was growing, never skirting the edges. I knew this was wrong but did not say anything, too much in awe of him.

On one of our visits we landed a slightly larger Brownie. This convinced us we would land another and we fished on for ages in the moonless darkness until we realised the other voices were silent and that we were alone.

We had been using the cast and move approach, casting three times, checking our flies for tangles and re-loading them with fresh maggots before moving sideways along the edge of the reservoir to repeat the process.

Findlay said:

"Right, Johnny Bonnie, time to head for home. Eh?"

"Do you know which way to go?"

# The Dams

"Aye, Just listen. Hear it? It's a train so if we head towards it we'll get to Stewarton Road and then we'll see the lights at Speir's Bridge. Eh?"

As we moved across the pitch black fields the wind dropped and the midges began to bite, driving us mad. Moving quicker, we were stumbling and tripping on unseen tufts of grass.

Ahead of us we saw a low wall. Without hesitation we leapt over it into the darkness to land on a flock of sheep which had been sleeping at the base of the wall. The drop was about ten feet, we estimated later. The sheep provided a soft landing and scattered bleating loudly.

Nearby a dog began frenzied barking. I thought of Buster and The Farmer.

"C'mon, Johnny Bonnie, lets skedaddle afore someone comes at us wi' a shotgun. Eh?"

We found Stewarton Road and made our way home. When we examined Findlay's father's fishing gear under a street lamp near the industrial estate at Speir's Bridge, we discovered two rod sections had been snapped and the spinning reel had dropped out of the gas mask satchel where it had been stowed. Our brownie was also missing from the bag. As we trudged back home, our lost brownie gradually became a prize specimen;

"Aye, Johnny Bonnie, probably a two-pounder. Eh? Probably the catch of the year frae The Dams. Eh?"

When I got home and slipped in with my key, the alarm clock in the kitchen showed it was nearly midnight. Dad was asleep in bed. He had left a plate of mince and potatoes with peas and carrot for me which I put in the oven to heat while I went to the bathroom to wash my hands and face and sponge myself before changing into my pyjamas.

Sitting up in bed I spooned my late meal while mulling over what had happened. Still hungry, I grilled two slices of toasted cheese and made a pot of tea which I ate while starting a new library book.

**And now back to my Winter's Walk thread**, moving forward from late August 1961 to early February 1962.

I headed first to Speir's Bridge onto Stewarton Road, past Patterton Station and the roadway to Patterton Farm. I kept walking for ages to be sure I was clear of The Farmer's land before heading to the right towards The Dams.

The railway line had been very recently electrified and the new trains were said to be almost silent. Looking both ways and listening carefully, I ran across the tracks. Dad told me later he was sure the trains out to Neilston did not run on Sundays.

# The Dams

Climbing over a boundary fence then squeezing through a hedge into a field, I skirted its edges and headed up across the hills towards The Dams with the Sun dipping towards the western horizon, filling the sky with red, orange and purples. I stood for ages watching it, admiring the spectacle as the fiery ball dropped ever more quickly.

At this height there was a stiff breeze and I began to realise I would need to be careful not to end up stranded in darkness. I reached the crest of the hill and looked out over The Dams and realised for the first time there was a scattering of a dozen or more other lochs visible from this vantage point.

The light was fading and I decided to cut across a grassy field and head back towards Stewarton Road and home. Half way across the field I heard a cow mooing. Then another joined in. Then another. I looked up towards the top of the hill and saw a large herd of cows moving towards me, gathering pace. I remembered my father saying that cows have poor eyesight. I began to run towards a metal gate at the bottom of the field. I could hear the cows thundering towards me. At the gate I threw myself over and dropped to the ground. The cows ran right up to the gate jostling each other and complaining.

I followed the farm track downwards back towards Arden heading through the gloom. When I smelled smoke from a chimney I eased myself through a hedge into a ploughed field and walked along its edge until I reached Stewarton Road.

At home I shared my stampede story with Dad who said the cattle which chased me had probably mistaken me for their Byreman coming to collect them for milking or, more likely, they were stirks (steers, yearling bullocks) being fattened for beef.

Truth be told, I had a very lucky escape.