

HACON
2014 C
BRITISH
SHORT STORIES
WEEK 10.

KELMAN
OWENS
GRAY



James Kelman

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Busted Scotch

I had been looking forward to this Friday night for a while. The first wage from the first job in England. The work-mates had assured me they played Brag in this club's casino. It would start when the cabaret ended. Packed full of bodies inside the main hall; rows and rows of men-only drinking pints of bitter and yelling at the strippers. One of the filler acts turned out to be a scotchman doing this harrylauder thing complete with kilt and trimmings. A terrible disgrace. Keep Right On To The End Of The Road he sang with four hundred and fifty males screaming Get Them Off Jock. Fine if I had been drunk and able to join in on the chants but as it was I was staying sober for the Brag ahead. Give the scotchman his due but – he stuck it out till the last and turning his back on them all he gave a big boo boopsidoo with the kilt pulled right up and flashing the Y-fronts. Big applause he got as well. The next act on was an Indian Squaw. Later I saw the side door into the casino section opening. I went through. Blackjack was the game until the cabaret finished. I sat down facing a girl of around my own age, she was wearing a black dress cut off the shoulders. Apart from me there were no other punters in the room.

Want to start, she asked.

Aye. Might as well. I took out my wages.

BUSTED SCOTCH

11

O, you're scotch. One of your countrymen was on stage tonight.

That a fact.

She nodded as she prepared to deal. She said, How much are you wanting to bet.

I shrugged. I pointed to the wages lying there on the edge of the baize.

All of it . . .

Aye. The lot.

She covered the bet after counting what I had. She dealt the cards.

Twist.

Bust . . .

the same is here again

My teeth are grut.

What has happened to all my dreams is what I would like to know. Presently I am a physical wreck. If by chance I scratch my head while strolling showers of dandruff reel onto the paved walkway, also hairs of varying length. Tooth decay. I am feart to look into a mirror. I had forgotten about them, my molars; these wee discoloured bones jutting out my gums and lonely, neglected, fighting amongst themselves for each particle of grub I have yet to pick. Jesus. And my feet – and this mayhap is the worst of my plight – my feet stink. The knees blue the hands filthy the nails grimy, uneatable. What I must do is bathe very soon.

One certainty: until recently I was living a life; this life is gone, tossed away in the passing. I am washed up. The sickness burbles about in my gut. A pure, physical reaction at last. I feel it heaving down there, set to erupt – or maybe just to remain, gagging.

It is all a mystery as usual. I am very much afraid I am going off my head. I lie on pavements clawing at myself with this pleasant smile probably on the countenance. I have been this way for years. More than half my life to present has

been spent in acquiring things I promptly dispose of. I seldom win at things. It is most odd. Especially my lack of interest. But for the smile, its well-being, the way I seem to regard people. It makes me kind of angry. I am unsure about much. Jesus christ.

Where am I again. London's the truth though I was reared in Glasgow. In regard to environment: I had plenty. But.

The weather. The hardtopped hardbacked bench concreted to the concrete patch amidst the grass. My spine against the hardback. My feet stuck out and crossed about the ankles. My testicles tucked between my thighs. I am always amazed that no damage is done them. I have forgotten what has happened to the chopper. The chopper is upright though far from erect. It lies against the fly of my breeks. And now uncomfortable.

Explanations sicken me. The depression is too real. A perpetual thirst but not for alcohol. Milk I drink when I find it. Smoking is bad. Maybe I am simply ill. Burping and farting. All sorts of wind. I should have a good meal of stuff. But even the thought. Jesus.

My hand has been bleeding. I cut it while entering a car. A stereo and one Johnny Cash cassette. My life is haunted by country & western music.

I have no cigarette in my gub.

And yet this late autumnal daylight. The spring in my step. Grinning all the while and wishing for hats to doff to elderly women. I am crying good-evening to folk. I might be in the mood for a game of something. Or a cold shower. When I settle down to consider a future my immediate straits are obliged to be conducive. I am grateful for the clement weather. Facts are to be faced. I am older than I was

recently. And I was feart to show my face that same recently. Breakfast is an awful meal. If you dont get your breakfast that's you fucked for the day.

I cannot eat a Johnny Cash cassette.

Breakfast has always been the one meal I like to think I insist upon. When I have money I eat fine breakfasts. One of the best I ever had was right here in the heart of old London Town. A long time ago. So good I had to leave a slice of toast for appearances' sake. I was never a non-eater. Could always devour huge quantities of the stuff. Anything at all; greasy fried bread, burnt custard or eggs. Even with the flu or bad hangovers. A plate of soup at 4 in the morning. I cannot understand people scoffing at snails' feet and octopi although to be honest I once lifted a can of peasbrose from a supermarket shelf only to discover I couldnt stomach the bastarn stuff. So: there we are. And also food-poisoning I suppose. If I ever get food-poisoning I would probably not feel like eating. Apart from this

But not now. Not presently, and this is odd. My belly may have a form of cramp.

Immediately my possessions include money I shall invest in certain essentials as well as the washing of that pair of items which constitute the whole of my wardrobe in the department of feet viz my socks. For my apparel excludes pants and vest. An effect of this was my chopper getting itself caught in the zipping-up process that follows upon the act of pissing. Normally one is prepared for avoiding such occurrences. But this time, being up an alley off one of her majesty's thoroughfares, I was obliged to rush. ZZZIPPP. Jesus. The belly. Even the remembrance. For a couple of moments I performed deep breathing exercises aware that my next act would of necessity be rapid. And this was

inducing vague associations of coronary attacks. My whole trunk then became icy cold. UUUNZZZIPP. Freed. It would not have happened had I been wearing pants. If I was being cared for pants would pose no problem, and neither would vests. Vests catch and soak up sweat unless they are made of nylon. In which case the sweat dribbles down your sides and is most damp and irritating.

My face looks to be ageing but is fine. A cheery face. It laughs at me from shop windows. The hairs protruding from my nostrils can be mistaken for the top of my moustache. The actual flesh, the cheekbones and red-veined eyeballs, the black patches round the sockets. Every single thing is fine. I am delighted with the lines. On my left – the right in fact, side of my nose has formed a large yellow head which I squeezed till the matter burst forth. I am still squeezing it because it lives. While squeezing it I am aware of how thin my skin is. I put myself in mind of an undernourished 87 year old. But the skin surrounding the human frame weighs a mere 6 ounces. Although opposed to that is the alsatian dog which leapt up and grabbed my arm; its teeth punctured the sleeve of the garment I was wearing but damage to the flesh was nil.

I bathed recently; for a time I lay steeping in the grime, wondering how I would manage out, without this grime returning to the pores in my skin. The method I employed was this: I arose in the standing position. The grime showed on the hairs of my legs though and I had to rinse those legs with cold because the hot had finished. I washed my socks on that occasion. They are of good quality. I sometimes keep them stuffed in the back pockets of my jeans.

The present is to be followed by nothing of account. Last night was terrible. All must now be faced. It has much to do with verges and watersheds.

Taxis to Blackfriars Bridge for the throwing of oneself off of are out of the question.

I have the shivers.

Reddish-blue blisters have appeared on the soles of my feet. They are no longer bouncing along. I can foresee. Nothing of account will follow. For some time now the futility of certain practices has not been lost on me. I shall sleep with the shivers, the jeans and the jumper, the socks and the corduroy shoes. I can forecast point A or point B: either is familiar. All will depend on X the unknown (which also affords of an either/or). The A and B of X equals the A and B that follow from themselves, not A and not B being unequal to not B and A. And they cannot be crossed as in Yankee Bets. Yet it always has been this way and I alone have the combinations.

I was planning on the park tonight. I left a brown paper bag concealed in a hedge near the Serpentine for the purpose. It will have been appropriated by now.

The trouble might well be sleep. I had a long one recently and it may well have upset the entire bodily functioning. This belly of mine. I must have slept for 10 hours. Normally I meet forenoons relatively alert.

Sheltering in an alley the other night, the early hours, in a motionless state. I should have been smoking, had just realized the cigarette in my gub as not burning where it should have been burning. As I reached for a match I heard movement. Two cats were on the job less than 20 yards distant. The alley banked by high walls. The cats should have been free from spectators and yet here was me, Jesus. In a film I saw recently there was this scruffy dog and a lady dog and he took her out for the night down this back alley

to meet his friends and these friends of his were Chefs in an Italian Restaurant, one of whom was named Luigi if I remember correctly. He brought out a table and candlesticks and while the dogs sat down the other friend came out with an enormous quantity of spaghetti and stuff. While they were tucking in out came Luigi again with a stringed instrument and him and his pal began singing an operatic duet.

This grass grows in a rough patch and cannot have it easy. The blades are grey green and light green; others are yellow but they lie directly on the earth, right on the soil. My feet were there and the insects crawled all around. A fine place for games. They go darting through the green blades and are never really satisfied till hitting the yellow ones below. And they dart headlong, set to collide all the time into each other but no, that last-minute body swerve. And that last-minute body swerve appears to unnerve them so that they begin rushing about in circles or halting entirely for an approximate moment.

I have to clear my head. I need peace peace peace. No thoughts. Nothing. Nothing at all.

Here I am as expected. The shoulders drooping; they have been strained recently. Arms hanging, and the fingers. Here: and rubbing my eyes to open them on the same again. Here, the same is here again. What else.

The Glenchecked Effort

This jacket had a glencheck pattern and 1 back centre vent, two side pockets and 1 out breast welt, two inside pockets and 1 in-tick. It was made to fit a 40" chest and the arms of a 6'4" gentleman. The buttons, two down the front and 1 on each cuff, were of dimpled leather. Inside the in-tick were ticket stubs and 4 spent matches; the inside pocket to the right contained a spotless handkerchief of the colour white, having parallel red lines along the border. The left outside pocket held eighteen pence in 2 pence pieces. It was a warm jacket, Handwoven in Harris read the label. It hung on a hook from where I lifted it neatly and stepped quickly outside and off. Though hanging loosely upon me it was a fine specimen and would have done much to protect me during the coming harsh winter. It should be stated that previous garments have afforded a more elegant finish but never before had I felt more pleasure than when surveying that person of mine while clad in the glenchecked effort.

I positioned myself to one corner of a rather quiet square to the right-hand side of Piccadilly looking south i.e. southwest. Two males and two females approached, all four of whom were of the Occidental delineation; each pair of eyes was concealed behind medium-sized spectacles with darkened shades. Can you spare a bloke a bob? I asked.

Pardon ...

Proffering my right hand in halting fashion I shrugged my shoulders, saying: A bob, can you spare a bloke a bob?

They were foreign. They conferred in their own language. At intervals I was obliged to glance to the ground when a gaze was directed towards me. I shuffled my feet. Then suddenly a handful of coins was produced and projected towards me. Many thanks, I said, many thanks. I clicked my heels, inclining my head. And off they went. Upon depositing the money into the left outside pocket I lowered myself to the pavement; folding my arms I sat on my heels and thus rested for several minutes. A discarded cigarette then appeared in close proximity to my shoes. Instantly I had collected it. I sucked the smoke deep into my lungs, managing to obtain a further three puffs before finally I was forced to chip it away towards the kerb. I reknotted my shoelaces and rose to the favoured standing position.

An elderly couple had entered my line of vision, the progress of each being considerable abetted by the instance of two fine Malacca canes. With a brief nod of appreciation I stepped hesitantly forwards. Can you spare a bloke a bob? I quoth.

With nary a sideways glance they hobbled past me, their canes striking the pavement in most forcible manner.

You sir, I cried to a youngish man, can you spare a bloke a bob?

What ...

Across the road I spied two uniformed fellows observing me with studied concentration. Slowly I turned and in a movement, was strolling to the corner, round which I hastened onwards. The skies were appearing to clouden. Yet my immediate prospects I continued to view with great optimism. Choosing a stance athwart a grassy verge I addressed successive pedestrians, but to no avail. A middle-aged couple had paused nearby, viewing my plight with apparent concern. Madam, quoth I, can you ...

You're a bloody disgrace, she said, that's what you are; giving us a showing up in front of the English.

I'm really most dreadfully sorry missis, I gave as my answer, I have been disabled.

That's no excuse for scrounging! She turned to her companion: Have you ever seen the like?

I've a wife and two weans missis and I can assure you, having flitted down here in search of the new life I had the bad fortune to fall off a roof.

And would you look at the state of that jacket he's wearing! he's lifted it from somewhere.

I have not.

Maybe he's genuine, hazarded her companion.

Ha ha.

I am missis, I really am.

Oh you are are you!

About to retort I inadvertently sneezed. I tugged the handkerchief from my pocket; out popped a membership card to the British Museum. You see, I said as I swabbed at my nostrils, here's my membership card to the British Museum, since my fall I've been embarking on a series of evening classes with a view to securing a light post.

I think he's genuine, the man remarked and withdrawing a 50 pence coin from a trouser pocket he handed it to me.

You're too soft, cried the woman.

Now you're not letting me down? asked the man firmly.

Definitely not mister. Thanks a lot. I can assure you that...

Not letting you down! Hh!

Come on Doreen, he muttered then taking her by the arm, they continued on towards the very heart of the City. But I continued northwards. Soon I was entering the hallowed portals of our splendid literary museum. Moving briskly I proceeded beyond the lines of uniformed worthies at a pace I deemed seemly. Finding a more secluded room I occupied a chair at a table and settled for an

indeterminate period. At length a bearded fellow who had been staring intently at the bibliographical pages of an handsomely bound volume, rose quietly and walked off. On the chair adjacent to his own lay an anorak, a plastic container, and a camera. Moments later I was strolling from the room, the camera safely secured in my inside left pocket. Entering a lavatory I continued to stroll, and passed into a vacant cubicle wherein I would remain for a lengthy interval. To occupy myself I examined each pocket and the gap between Harris Tweed and nylon lining, hoping against hope that I might discover other articles. It was not to be. Yet during my time in the cubicle no solitary voice of an excited nature had pierced my repose. There was much to be thankful for. I counted to three then pulled the plug and promptly unsnibbed the cubicle door. With practised eye I glanced to the washbasins before stepping forwards. I washed my hands. In the mirror I surveyed my glencheck jacket with undisguised satisfaction. Just then, as I prepared to dry my hands, an object attracted my attention. It was a knapsack. Slowly I turned, and in a movement, was strolling for the exit, uplifting the knapsack without the slightest check in my stride, and out through the doorway, allowing the door to swing backwards. In an instant I had considered the various uniformed gentlemen, their respective positions and demeanour, and was moving briskly, stepping into the magnificent surroundings of the vast entrance hall, then downwards onto the paved pathway to the iron gates, mingling with diverse individuals.

My getaway had been achieved with absurd ease. I was elated. You lucky bastard, I thought, you've knocked it off again!

The clouds were forming in puffs of the purest white. Surely a sign! Quickening my pace I crossed Russell Square, marching resolutely to the small grass park some two furlongs distant. While making my way to the rearmost bench my attention was drawn to a tearful urchin whose

ball was ensconced on top of a thorny bush. I reached for it and gave it an almighty boot. The ball travelled high in the air. I patted the little fellow on the head and off he scampered in pursuit. When seated on the bench I sat for a time before examining the contents of the knapsack. But at last the moment had arrived; with a brief glance to the sky I tugged at the zip, and could list the following articles:

- (i) One pair socks of the colour navy blue
- (ii) One comb, plastic
- (iii) One towel
- (iv) One pair swimming trunks of the colours maroon & white
- (v) One plastic bag containing:
 - a) cheese sandwich
 - b) lettuce & tomato sandwich
 - c) slice of Madeira cake.

I smiled to myself and, withdrawing the camera from my inside left pocket, deposited it at the bottom of the knapsack. As I rose from the bench I chanced to glance at '... God's fair heaven', and was reminded of these few lines of the lyricist:

Tell me – What is the meaning of man,
Whence hath he come, whither doth go . . .

Slinging the knapsack over my shoulders with a mischievous grin I walked onwards.

The Witness

As expected the windows were draped over with offwhite curtains, the body dressed in the navyblue three-piece suit, with the checked bunnet on the head. Drawing a chair close in I sat, smoking. I noticed the eyelids parting. The eyes were grey and white with red veins. The cigarette fell from my fingers. I reached quickly to get it up off the carpet. A movement on the bed. Scuffling noises. The head had turned. The eyes peering toward me. There was not a thing I could say. He was attempting to sit up now. He sat up. I placed a hand of mine on his right forearm, I was trying to restrain him. He wanted to rise. I withdrew my hand and he swivelled until his feet contacted space. I moved back. His feet lowered to the carpet then the rest of his body was up from the bed. He stood erect, the shoulders pushed back. The shoes on his feet; the laces were knotted far too tightly. I picked the checked bunnet up from where it was now lying by the pillow and passed it to him, indicating his head. He took it and pulled it on, smoothed down the old hair at the sides of his head. I was wanting to know if he was going to the kitchen: he nodded. Although he walked normally to the door he fumbled on the handle. He was irritated by this clumsiness. He made way for me. I could open the door easily. He had to brush past me. The cuff of his right sleeve touched my hand. I watched him. When he

got to the kitchen door he did not hesitate and he did not fumble with its handle. The door swung behind him. I heard her voice cry out. He was making for her. I gazed through the narrow gap in the doorway. He was struggling with her. He began to strike her about the shoulders, beating her down onto her knees; and she cried, cried softly. This was it. This was the *thing*. I held my head in both hands.

Are you drinking sir?

THEY had been seeking me for ages but being a devious old guy I managed to give them the slip on quite a few occasions. They found me in the broo. I was in there performing my song & dance routine, music from the 1st world war. At first I seemed not to notice them standing in the doorway then when I did I acted as though totally uninterested and my bravado had to be respected, not for its own sake so much as the effect it had on my pursuers. I turned my back on them and performed to those queuing to sign the register. Behind the counter the clerks looked slightly irritated although a couple of the younger brigade were smiling at my antics. But their smiles didnt linger, they continued working as though I wasnt there. I didnt bother at all, just carried on with the performance. Somehow an impression had been gained that no matter how erratically I might behave the clerks would never have me ejected. No doubt the reaction would be different had I become violent, or even explicitly abusive. Then suddenly, towards the end of a song, I lost concentration for a moment and appeared in danger of failing to perceive the course – but then I grinned briefly and continued the game. It was strange to behold. Nearby there were four youths sitting on a bench and they were stamping their feet and cheering and then one of them had flicked a burning cigarette end in

my direction. I was dancing so nimbly that I scarcely seemed to interrupt myself while bending to uplift it; I nipped off the burning ash, sticking the remainder of it in an interior pocket of my greatcoat. Then I glanced swiftly at the doorway, whirled to face the counter; onwards I jiggled across the floor, wagging my right forefinger at two young girls queuing at *enquiries*. I proceeded to address the chorus at them, the girls smiling their embarrassment, laughing lightly that they had no money, nor even a cigarette to spare. Yet still I persisted at them and the girls now having to avert their faces from me while I with the beaming smile, cutting my capers as though the doorway had never existed. And thank you sir, I was crying to a smallish fellow who had rolled me a cigarette, thank you sir. This distracting me from the girls and back again I faced the counter; but my sly glance at the doorway was unmistakable and I held the rolled cigarette aloft in my left hand, blatantly displaying it for their benefit. And I laughed at no one especially and again cried thank you sir, thank you sir, with both arms aloft now and wagging my hands round and round in preparation for the launch into my final chorus, but just at this point I made good my escape, and it wasn't till much later that they found me. I was in a stretch of waste ground near the river. I stared at them when they approached, but the stare expressed only the vaguest curiosity. My head lolled sideways, knocking the unbuttoned epaulette askew. They came forward and prodded my shoulder until my eyelids parted and my groan became a groan of recognition. Thank you sir I muttered thank you sir, and them, stepping back the way as though alarmed. But they weren't alarmed, they were angry. And judging by the manner in which my gaze dropped to the ground I was trying to avoid witnessing it. And then they began talking to me in a language that was foreign. At length they stopped. I withdrew a half-smoked cigarette from an interior pocket and held it to my mouth until being given a

light. I inhaled only once on it, before placing it carefully on the ground; then I picked it up and stubbed it out, smiling in a very sleek way. I glanced at them and said are you drinking sir? For a moment there was silence. When they began shouting at me there was an odd sense in which it seemed to have lasted a while but only now become audible. But to none of it did I react. I was not smiling, I sat there as though in deep concentration. Eventually there was silence again, and they stared at me with open contempt. It was obvious I was now getting irritated. I looked at them and glared, my eyes twitching at the corners as though I was about to say something but I didn't say anything. I just shook my head and grunted sarcastically; it was being made plain that I couldn't care less.



Agnes Owens

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Arabella

Arabella pushed the pram up the steep path to her cottage. It was hard going since the four dogs inside were a considerable weight. She admonished one of them which was about to jump out. The dog thought better of it and sat down again. The others were sleeping, covered with her best coat which was a mass of dog hairs; the children, as she preferred to call them, always came first with her. Most of her Social Security and the little extra she earned was spent on them. She was quite satisfied with her diet of black sweet tea and cold sliced porridge kept handy while her children dined on mince, liver and chops.

The recent call on her parents had been depressing. Loyal though she was, she had to admit they were poor company nowadays. Her bedridden father had pulled the sheet over his face when she had entered. Her mother had sat bent and tightlipped over the fire, occasionally throwing on a lump of coal, while she tried to interest them in the latest gossip; but they never uttered a word except for the terse question "When are you leaving?" – and the bunch of dandelions she had gathered was straight away flung into the fire. Arabella had tried to make the best of things, giving her father a kiss on his lips before she left, but he was so cold he could have been dead. She had patted her mother on the head, but the response

was a spittle which slid down her coat like a fast-moving snail.

Back inside her cottage she hung her hat on a peg and looked around with a certain amount of distaste. She had to admit the place was a mess compared to her mother's bare boards, but then her mother had no children to deal with. Attempting to tidy it up she swept a pile of bones and bits of porridge lying on the floor into a pail. Then she flung the contents on to a jungle of weeds outside her door. Good manure, she thought, and didn't she have the loveliest dandelions for miles.

"Children," she called. "Come and get your supper."

The dogs jumped out of the pram, stretching and yawning nervously. One dragged itself around. It was the youngest and never felt well. Arabella's training methods were rigorous. This had been a difficult one at first, but the disobedience was soon curbed – though now it was always weak and had no appetite. The other three ate smartly with stealthy looks at Arabella. Her moods were unpredictable and often violent. However, she was tired out now from her chores and decided to rest. She lay down on top of a pile of coats on the bed, arranging her long black dress carefully – the dogs had a habit of sniffing up her clothes if given half a chance. Three dogs jumped up beside her and began to lick her face and whine. The one with no appetite abandoned its mince and crawled under the bed.

Arabella awoke with a start. Her freshened mind realized there was some matter hanging over it, to which she must give some thought. It was the letter she had received two days previously, which she could not read. Her parents had never seen the necessity for schooling and so far Arabella had managed quite well without it. Her reputation as a healer was undisputed and undiminished by the lack of education. In fact, she had a regular clientele of respectable gentlemen who called upon her from time to

time to have their bodies relaxed by a special potion of cow dung, mashed snails or frogs, or whatever dead creature was handy. Strangely enough, she never had female callers. (Though once Nellie Watkins, desperate to get rid of the warts on her neck, had called on her to ask for a cure. Whatever transpired was hearsay, but the immediate outcome of it was that Nellie had poured the potion over Arabella, threatening to have her jailed. But she never did. Arabella's power was too strong.)

The councillor's son, who had been the caller on the evening after she received the letter, explained that it was from the Sanitary Inspector and more or less stated that if she didn't get rid of her animals and clean her place up she would be put out of her home. Then he changed the subject since he knew it would be out of the question for Arabella to clean anything, that was one thing beyond her powers, saying, "Now we have had our fun get me some water — that is if you use such a commodity. I know soap is not possible." And while Arabella fetched the water lying handy in an empty soup tin on the sink, he took a swallow from a small bottle in his jacket pocket to pull himself together. Arabella did not like the tone of the letter. Plaintively she asked, "What will I do, Murgatroyd?"

"That's your worry," he replied, as he put on his trousers. "Anyway the smell in this place makes me sick. I don't know what's worse — you or the smell."

"Now, now, Murgatroyd," said Arabella reprovingly, pulling a black petticoat over her flabby shoulders, "you know you always feel better after your treatment. Don't forget the children's money box on your way out."

Murgatroyd's final advice, before he left, was, "Try your treatment on the Sanitary Inspector when he calls. It might work wonders."

After giving this matter a lot of thought and getting nowhere she decided to call on her parents again. They

were rather short on advice nowadays, but she still had faith in their wisdom.

Her mother was still huddled over the fire and she noticed with vague surprise that her father did not draw the sheet over his face. Optimistically, she considered that he could be in a good mood.

"Mummy, I'm sorry I had no time to bring flowers, but be a dear and tell me the best way to get rid of Sanitary Inspectors."

Her mother did not move a muscle, or say a word.

"Tell me what to do," wheedled Arabella. "Is it chopped worms with sheep's dropping or rat's liver with bog myrtles?"

Her mother merely threw a lump of coal on to the fire. Then she softened. "See your father," she replied.

Arabella leapt over to the bed and almost upset the stained pail lying beside it. She took hold of her father's hand, which was dangling down loosely. She clasped it to her sagging breast and was chilled by its icy touch, so she hurriedly flung the hand back on the bed saying, "Daddy darling, what advice can you give your little girl on how to get rid of Sanitary Inspectors?"

He regarded her with a hard immovable stare then his hand slid down to dangle again. She looked at him thoughtfully and pulled the sheet over his face. "Mummy, I think Daddy is dead."

Her mother took out a pipe from her pocket and lit it from the fire with a long taper. After puffing for a few seconds, she said, "Very likely."

Arabella realized that the discussion was over. "Tomorrow I will bring a wreath for Daddy," she promised as she quickly headed for the door. "I have some lovely dandelions in my garden."

Back home again, Arabella studied her face in a cracked piece of mirror and decided to give it a wash. She moved a

damp smelly cloth over it, which only made the seams of dirt show up more clearly. Then she attempted to run a comb through her tangled mass of hair, but the comb snapped. Thoroughly annoyed, she picked out a fat louse from a loose strand of hair and crushed it with her fingernails. Then she sat down on the bed and brooded. So engrossed was she in her worry she forgot to feed her children, who by this time were whining and squatting in corners to relieve themselves. She couldn't concentrate on making their food, so she took three of them outside and tied them to posts. The fourth one, under the bed, remained very still. Eventually she decided the best thing to do was to have some of her magical potion ready, though such was her state of mind that she doubted its efficiency in the case of Sanitary Inspectors. Besides, there was no guarantee he suffered from afflictions. Sighing, she went outside. Next to her door stood a large barrel where she kept the potion. She scooped a portion of the thick evil-smelling substance into a delve jar, stirred it up a bit to get the magic going, then returned indoors and laid it in readiness on the table. She was drinking a cup of black sweet tea when the knock came on the door. Smoothing down her greasy dress and taking a deep breath to calm herself, she opened it.

The small man confronting her had a white wizened face under a large bowler hat.

"Please enter," requested Arabella regally. With head held high she turned into the room. The Sanitary Inspector tottered on the doorstep. He had not been feeling well all day. Twenty years of examining foetid drains and infested dwellings had weakened his system. He had another five years to go before he retired, but he doubted he would last that long.

"Please sit down," said Arabella, motioning to an orange box and wondering how she could broach the subject of cures before he could speak about his business. She could

see at a glance that this was a sick man, though not necessarily one who would take his clothes off. The Sanitary Inspector opened his mouth to say something but found that he was choking and everything was swimming before him. He had witnessed many an odious spectacle in his time but this fat sagging filthy woman with wild tangled hair and great staring eyes was worse than the nightmares he often had of dismembered bodies in choked drains. Equally terrible was the smell, and he was a connoisseur in smells. He managed to seat his lean trembling shanks on the orange box and found himself at eye level with a delve jar in the centre of a wooden table. Again he tried to speak but his mouth appeared to be full of poisonous gas.

"My good man," said Arabella, genuinely concerned when she saw his head swaying, "I can see you are not well and it so happens I am a woman of great powers."

She knew she had no time for niceties. Quickly she undressed and stood before him as guileless as a June bride. The small man reeled. This grotesque pallid flesh drooping sickly wherever possible was worse than anything he had ever witnessed.

"Now just take your clothes off, and you'll soon feel better," said Arabella in her most winsome tone. "I have a magical potion here that cures all ailments and eases troubled minds." So saying, she turned and gave him a close-up view of her monumental buttocks. She dipped her fingers in the jar and tantalizingly held out a large dollop in front of his nose. It was too much for him. His heart gave a dreadful lurch. He hiccuped loudly, then his head sagged on to his chest.

Arabella was very much taken aback. Nothing like this had ever happened before, though it had been obvious to her when she first saw him that he was an inferior type. She rubbed the ointment on her fingers off on the jar, then dressed. The manner in which he lay, limp and dangling, reminded her of her father. This man must be dead, but

even dead, he was a nuisance. She would have to get rid of him quickly if she didn't want it to get around that her powers were waning. Then she remembered the place where she had buried some of her former children and considered that he would fit into the pram -- he was small enough. Yet it was all so much bother and very unpleasant and unpleasantness always wore her out.

She went outside to take a look at the pram. The dogs were whining and pulling on the fence. Feeling ashamed by her neglect she returned to fetch their supper, when the barrel caught her eye. Inspiration came to her in a flash. The barrel was large -- it was handy -- and there would be an extra fillip added to the ointment. She felt humbled by the greatness of her power.

Cheerfully she approached the figure slumped like a rag doll against the table. It was easy to drag him outside, he was so fragile. Though he wasn't quite dead because she heard him whisper, "Sweet Jesus, help me." This only irritated her. She could have helped him if he had let her. She dragged his unresisting body towards the barrel and with no difficulty toppled him inside to join the healing ointment. With a sigh of satisfaction she replaced the lid. As usual everything had worked out well for her.

Bus Queue

The boy was out of breath. He had been running hard. He reached the bus stop with a sinking heart. There was only a solitary woman waiting -- the bus must have gone.

"Is the bus away missus?" he gasped out. The woman regarded him coldly. "I really couldn't say," then drew the collar of her well-cut coat up round her face to protect herself against the cold wind blowing through the broken panes of the bus shelter. The boy rested against the wire fence of the adjacent garden taking in long gulps of air to ease the harshness in his lungs. Anxiously he glanced around when two middle-aged females approached and stood within the shelter.

"My it's awfy cauld the night," said one. The well-dressed woman nodded slightly, then turned her head away.

"Ah hope that bus comes soon," said the other woman to her companion, who replied, "The time you have to wait would sicken ye if you've jist missed one."

"I wonder something is not done about it," said the well-dressed woman sharply, turning back to them.

"Folks hiv been complainin' for years," was the cheerful reply, "but naebody cares. Sometimes they don't come this way at all, but go straight through by the main road. It's always the same for folk like us. If it was wan o' these

high-class districts like Milngavie or Bearsden they wud soon smarten their ideas."

At this point a shivering middle-aged man joined them. He stamped about impatiently with hands in pockets. "Bus no' due yet Maggie?" he asked one of the women.

"Probably overdue."

Her friend chipped in, "These buses would ruin your life. We very near missed the snowball in the bingo last week through the bloody bus no' comin'." The man nodded with sympathy.

"Gaun to the bingo yersel' Wullie?"

"Naw. Ah'm away to meet ma son. He's comin' hame on leave and is due in at the Central Station. Ah hope this bus comes on time or Ah might miss him."

"Oh aye - young Spud's in the army ower in Belfast. It must be terrible there."

"Better that than bein' on the dole."

"Still Ah widny like bein' in Belfast wi' all that bombin' and murder."

"Oor Spud's got guts," said the man proudly.

The boy leaning on the fence began to sway back and forth as if he was in some private agony.

The well-dressed woman said loudly, "I shouldn't wonder if that fence collapses."

The other three looked over at the boy. The man said, "Here son, you'll loosen that fence if you don't stop yer swingin'."

The boy looked back in surprise at being addressed. He gradually stopped swaying, but after a short time he began to kick the fence with the backs of his heels as if he was obliged to keep moving in some way.

"You wud think the young wans nooadays all had St Vitus dance," remarked the man.

The well-dressed woman muttered, "Hooligans."

It was now becoming dark and two or three more people emerged from the shadows to join the queue. The

general question was asked if the bus was away, and answered with various pessimistic speculations.

"Hi son," someone called, "you'd better join the queue." The boy shook his head in the negative, and a moody silence enveloped the gathering. Finally it was broken by a raucous female voice saying, "Did you hear about Bella's man? Wan night he nivver came hame. When he got in at eight in the morning she asked him where hud he been. Waitin' for a bus, said he."

Everyone laughed except the well-dressed woman and the boy, who had not been listening.

"Look, there's a bus comin' up," spoke a hopeful voice. "Maybe there will be wan doon soon."

"Don't believe it," said another, "Ah've seen five buses go up at times and nothin' come doon. In this place they vanish into thin air."

"Bring back the Pakkies," someone shouted.

"They're all away hame. They couldny staun the pace."

"Don't believe it. They're all licensed grocers noo."

"You didny get ony cheap fares aff the Pakkies, but at least their buses were regular."

Conversation faded away as despondency set in. The boy's neck was painful from looking up the street. Suddenly he stiffened and drew himself off the fence when two youths came into view. They walked straight towards him and stood close, one at each side.

"You're no' feart," said one with long hair held in place with a bandeau.

"How?" the boy answered hoarsely.

"The Rock mob know whit to expect if they come oot here."

"Ah wis jist visitin' ma bird."

"Wan of oor team is in hospital because of the Rock. Twenty-four stitches he's got in his face - hit wi' a bottle."

"Ah had nothin' to dae wi' that."

"You were there, weren't ye?"

"Ah didny know big Jake wis gaun tae put a bottle on him."

"Neither did oor mate."

All this was said in whispers.

"Hey yous," said an irate woman, "Ah hope you don't think you're gaun tae jump the queue when the bus comes."

"That's all right," said the one with the bandeau. "We're jist talkin' tae oor mate. We'll get to the end when the bus comes."

The crowd regarded them with disapproval. On the other side of the fence where the youths were leaning, a dog which was running about the garden began to bark frantically at the bus queue.

"Shut yer noise," someone shouted, which incensed the dog further. One of the youths aimed a stone at its back. The bark changed to a pained howl and the dog retreated to a doorstep to whimper pitifully for some minutes.

"Nae need for that," said the man, as murmurs of sympathy were taken up for the dog.

"This generation has nae consideration for anyone noo-adays," a voice declared boldly.

"Aye, they wid belt you as soon as look at you."

Everyone stared hard at the youths as if daring them to start belting, but the youths looked back with blank expressions.

"They want to join the army like ma son," the man said in a loud voice. "He disny have it easy. Discipline is what he gets and it's done him the world of good."

"Ower in Ireland, that's where Wullie's son is," declared one of the women who had joined the queue early.

"Poor lad," said the woman with the raucous voice, "havin' to deal wi' the murderin' swine in that place. They should send some o' these young thugs here tae Ireland. They'd soon change their tune."

"They wid be too feart to go," the man replied. "They've nae guts for that sort of thing."

At this point the youth in the middle of the trio on the fence was reflecting on the possibility of asking the people in the queue for help. He considered that he was safe for the moment but when the bus came he would be forced to enter and from then on he would be trapped with his escorts. But he didn't know how to ask for help. He suspected they wouldn't listen to him, judging by their comments. Even if the bizzies were to pass by at this moment, what could he say. Unless he got the boot or the knife they would only laugh.

Then someone shouted, "Here's the bus," and the queue cheered. The blood drained from the youth's face.

"Mind yous two," said a warning voice as the bus moved up to the stop, "the end of the queue."

"That lad in the middle can get to the front. He was wan o' the first here," a kindly voice spoke. The well-dressed woman was the first to climb aboard, saying, "Thank goodness."

"That's O.K.," said the youth with the bandeau, "we're all gettin' on together," as both he and his mate moved in front of the other youth to prevent any attempt on his part to break into the queue.

"Help me mister!" he shouted, now desperate. "These guys will not let me on." But even as he said this he knew it sounded feeble. The man glanced over but only momentarily. He had waited too long for the bus to be interested. "Away and fight like ma son," was his response. In a hopeless attempt the youth began punching and kicking at his guards when everyone was on. The faces of those who were seated peered out at the commotion. The driver started up the engine in an effort to get away quickly. One of the youths shouted to his mate as he tried to ward off the blows. "Quick, get on. We're no' hingin about here all night." He had already received a painful kick

which took the breath from him. The one with the bandeau had a split second to make up his mind, but he was reluctant to let his victim go without some kind of vengeance for his mate in hospital. Whilst dodging wild punches from the enemy he managed to get his hand into his pocket. It fastened on a knife. In a flash he had it out and open. He stuck it straight into the stomach of the youth. His companion who had not noticed this action pulled him on to the platform of the bus just as it was moving away.

"Get aff," shouted the driver, angry but unable to do anything about it. The other youth, bleeding, staggered against the fence, immersed in a sea of pain. The last words he heard when the bus moved away were, "Ah wis jist waitin' on wan number -" Then he heard no more. Someone peering out of the back window said, "There's a boy hingin ower the fence. Looks as if he's hurt bad."

"Och they canny fight for nuts nooadays. They should be in Belfast wi' ma son."

"True enough." The boy was dismissed from their thoughts. They were glad to be out of the cold and on their way.

Getting Sent For

Mrs Sharp knocked timidly on the door marked 'Headmistress'.

"Come in," a cool voice commanded.

She shuffled in, slightly hunched, clutching a black plastic shopping bag and stood waiting for the headmistress to raise her eyes from the notebook she was engrossed in.

"Do sit down," said the headmistress when Mrs Sharp coughed apologetically.

Mrs Sharp collapsed into a chair and placed her bag between her feet. The headmistress relinquished the notebook with a sigh and began.

"I'm sorry to bring you here, but recently George has become quite uncontrollable in class. Something will have to be done."

Mrs Sharp shifted about in the chair and assumed a placating smile.

"Oh dear - I thought he was doing fine. I didn't know -"

"It's been six months since I spoke to you," interrupted the headmistress, "and I'm sorry to say he has not improved one bit. In fact he's getting steadily worse."

Mrs Sharp met the impact of the gold-framed spectacles nervously as she said, "It's not as if he gets away with anything at home. His Da and me are always on at him, but he pays no attention."

The headmistress's mouth tightened. "He will just have to pay attention."

"What's he done this time?" Mrs Sharp asked with a surly edge to her voice.

"He runs in and out of class when the teacher's back is turned and distracts the other children."

Mrs Sharp eased out her breath. "Is that all?"

The headmistress was incredulous. "Is that all? With twenty-five pupils in a class, one disruptive element can ruin everything. It's difficult enough to push things into their heads as it is –" She broke off.

"Seems to me they're easily distracted," said Mrs Sharp.

"Well children are, you know." The headmistress allowed a frosty smile to crease her lips.

"Maybe he's not the only one who runs about," observed Mrs Sharp mildly.

"Mrs Sharp, I assure you George is the main trouble-maker, otherwise I would not have sent for you."

The light from the headmistress's spectacles was as blinding as a torch.

Mrs Sharp shrank back. "I'm not meaning to be cheeky, but George isn't a bad boy. I can hardly credit he's the worst in the class."

The headmistress conceded, "No, I wouldn't say he's the worst. There are some pupils I've washed my hands of. As yet there's still hope for George. That's why I sent for you. If he puts his mind to it he can work quite well, but let's face it, if he's going to continue the way he's doing, he'll end up in a harsher place than this school."

Mrs Sharp beamed as if she was hearing fulsome praise. "You mean he's clever?"

"I wouldn't say he's clever," said the headmistress cautiously, "but he's got potential. But really," she snapped, "it's more his behaviour than his potential that worries us."

Mrs Sharp tugged her wispy hair dreamily. "I always knew George had it in him. He was such a bright baby. Do you know he opened his eyes and stared straight at me when he was a day old. Sharp by name, and sharp by nature – that's what his Da always said."

"That may be," said the headmistress, taking off her spectacles and rubbing her eyes, "but sharp is not what I'm looking for."

Then, aware of Mrs Sharp's intent inspection of her naked face, she quickly replaced them, adding, "Another thing. He never does his homework."

"I never knew he got any," said Mrs Sharp, surprised. "Mind you we've often asked him 'Don't you get any homework?' and straight away he answers 'We don't get any' –"

The headmistress broke in. "He's an incorrigible liar."

"Liar?" Mrs Sharp clutched the collar of her bottle-green coat.

"Last week he was late for school. He said it was because you made him stay and tidy his room."

Mrs Sharp's eyes flickered. "What day was that?"

"Last Tuesday." The headmistress leaned over her desk. "Did you?"

"I don't know what made him say that," said Mrs Sharp in wonderment.

"Because he's an incorrigible liar."

Mrs Sharp strove to be reasonable. "Most kids tell lies now and again to get out of a spot of bother."

"George tells more lies than most – mind you," the headmistress's lips twisted with humour, "we were all amused at the idea of George tidying, considering he's the untidiest boy in the class."

Mrs Sharp reared up. "Oh, is he? Well let me tell you he's tidy when he leaves the house. I make him wash his face and comb his hair every day. How the devil should I know what he gets up to when he leaves?"

"Keep calm, Mrs Sharp. I'm sure you do your best under the circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"Don't you work?" the headmistress asked pleasantly.

Mrs Sharp sagged. She had a presentiment of doom. Her husband had never liked her working. 'A woman's place is in the home,' he always said when any crisis arose – despite the fact that her income was a necessity.

"Yes," she said.

"Of course," said the headmistress, her spectacles directed towards the top of Mrs Sharp's head, "I understand that many mothers work nowadays, but unfortunately they are producing a generation of latch-key children running wild. Far be it for me to judge the parents' circumstances, but I think a child's welfare comes first." She smiled toothily. "Perhaps I'm old-fashioned, but –"

"I suppose you're going to tell me a woman's place is in the home?" asked Mrs Sharp, through tight lips.

"If she has children, I would say so."

Mrs Sharp threw caution to the wind. "If I didn't work George wouldn't have any uniform to go to school with –"

She broke off at the entrance of an agitated tangle-haired young woman.

"I'm sorry Miss McHare," said the young woman, "I didn't know you were with someone –"

"That's all right," said the headmistress. "What is it?"

"It's George Sharp again."

"Dear, dear!" The headmistress braced herself while Mrs Sharp slumped.

"He was fighting, in the playground. Ken Wilson has a whopper of an eye. Sharp is outside. I was going to send him in, but if you're engaged –"

The headmistress addressed Mrs Sharp. "You see what I mean. It just had to be George again."

She turned to the young teacher. "This is George's mother."

"Good morning," said the young teacher, without enthusiasm.

"How do you know George started it?" asked Mrs Sharp, thrusting her pale face upwards. The headmistress stiffened. She stood up and towered above Mrs Sharp like a female Gulliver. Mrs Sharp pointed her chin at a right angle in an effort to focus properly.

The headmistress ordered, "Bring the boy in."

George Sharp shuffled in, tall and gangling, in contrast to his hunched mother, who gave him a weak smile when he looked at her blankly.

"Now," said the headmistress, "I hear you've been fighting."

George nodded.

"You know fighting is forbidden within these grounds."

"Ken Wilson was fighting as well," he replied hoarsely, squinting through strands of dank hair.

"Ken Wilson is a delicate boy who does not fight."

"He kicked me," George mumbled, his eyes swivelling down to his sandshoes.

The headmistress explained to no one in particular, "Of course George is not above telling lies."

Mrs Sharp rose from her chair like a startled bird. "Listen son, did that boy kick you?"

"Yes Ma," George said eagerly.

"Where?"

He pointed vaguely to his leg.

"Pull up your trouser."

George did so.

"Look," said Mrs Sharp triumphantly, "that's a black and blue mark."

"Looks more like dirt," tittered the young teacher.

"Dirt is it?" Mrs Sharp rubbed the mark. George winced.

"That's sore."

"It's a kick mark. Deny it if you can."

"Come now," said the headmistress, "we're not in a

courtroom. Besides, whether it's a kick mark or not doesn't prove a thing. Possibly it was done in retaliation. Frankly I don't see Ken Wilson starting it. He hasn't got the stamina."

"Is that so?" said Mrs Sharp. "I know Ken Wilson better than you, and he's no better than any other kid when it comes to starting fights. He's well known for throwing stones and kicking cats -"

The headmistress intervened. "In any case this is beside the point. I brought you here to discuss George's behaviour in general, and not this matter in particular."

"And bloody well wasted my time," retorted Mrs Sharp.

The headmistress's mouth fell open at the effrontery. She turned to the young teacher.

"You may go now, Miss Tilly," adding ominously to George, "You too, Sharp. I'll deal with you later."

George gave his mother an anguished look as he was led out.

"Don't worry," she called to him.

The headmistress said, "I don't know what you mean by that, because I think your son has plenty to worry about."

Mrs Sharp stood up placing her hands on her hips. Her cheeks were now flushed.

"You know what I think - I think this is a case of persecution. I mean the way you carried on about George fighting just proves it. And all this guff about him distracting the class - well if that flibbery gibbery miss is an example of a teacher then no wonder the class is easily distracted. Furthermore," she continued wildly before the headmistress could draw her breath, "I'll be writing to the authorities to let them know how my son is treated. Don't think they won't be interested because all this bullying in school is getting a big write-up nowadays."

"How dare you talk to me like that," said the headmistress, visibly white round the nose. "It's your son who is the bully."

Mrs Sharp jeered, "So now he's a bully. While you're at it is there anything else? I suppose if you had your way he'd be off to a remand home."

"No doubt he'll get there of his own accord."

The remark was lost on Mrs Sharp, now launched into a tirade of reprisal for all injustices perpetrated against working-class children and her George in particular. The headmistress froze in the face of such eloquence, which was eventually summed up by the final denunciation:

"So if I was you I'd hand in my notice before all this happens. Anyway you're getting too old for the job. It stands to reason your nerves are all shook up. It's a well-known fact that spinster teachers usually end cracking up and being carted off."

The change in their complexions was remarkable. The headmistress was flushed purple with rage and Mrs Sharp was pallid with conviction.

There was a space of silence. Then the headmistress managed to say, "Get out - before I call the janitor."

Mrs Sharp gave a hard laugh. "Threats is it now? Still I'm not bothered, for it seems to me you've got all the signs of cracking up right now. By the way if you lay one finger on George I'll put you on a charge."

She flounced out of the room when the headmistress picked up the telephone, and banged the door behind her. The headmistress replaced the receiver without dialling, then sat down at the desk with her head in her hands, staring at the open notebook.

Outside Mrs Sharp joined a woman waiting against the school railings, eating crisps.

"How did you get on?" the woman asked.

Mrs Sharp rummaged in her plastic bag and brought out a packet of cigarettes. Before she shoved one into her mouth she said, "Tried to put me in my place she did - well I soon showed her she wasn't dealing with some kind of underling -"

The woman threw the empty crisp packet on to the grass.

"What about George?"

Mrs Sharp looked bitter. "See that boy – he's a proper devil. Wait till I get him home and I'll beat the daylights out of him. I'll teach him to get me sent for."

Commemoration Day

Molly strolled through the gates of the big city park possessed by a mild sense of adventure after she had cashed her Giro and purchased twenty cigarettes instead of her usual ten. She walked over the grass to the pond and watched children throw bread at the ducks but the wind blowing over the water was too keen for comfort. She moved onwards, tightening the belt of her skimpy yellow raincoat that clung to her lumpy hips like orange peel. A stone thrown by one of the children skimmed close to her fat legs. When she reached the protective shrubbery of the gardens she allowed herself the luxury of a few puffs. She studied tags tied to foreign-looking plants and was none the wiser. When she pulled on a bud about to bloom into some mysterious flower, the stem broke. Guiltily she threw it down. Following a side path in the hope of finding someone to chat with, even if only about the weather, she almost collided with a young man running hard towards her. As they stood, nearly eye to eye, she saw he looked as startled as she felt, but when she stepped aside to let him pass he asked harshly, "What's the time missus?"

"Half-past two," she said, glancing at her watch and not liking the word 'missus' or anything else about him.

"Is that all?"



Alasdair Gray

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A Small Thistle

The Declaration of Independence by the United States' representatives in 1781 put the American episcopal church into great difficulty. It had no bishops, yet believed that bishops were essential to the making of new priests. Hitherto English bishops had consecrated American priests, but now the two countries were at war. The Church of England was headed by King George, who thought the U.S.A. an illegal organization. It seemed that the American episcopal priesthood must dwindle through senility into extinction, or turn itself into a wholly new kind of protestant sect. However, a third way was found. Although England's government had absorbed the Scottish one seventy-five years earlier, Scotland's legal system and churches stayed independent and intact. A leading light in the tiny Scottish Episcopal Church was the Rev. James Skinner, a poet whose *Reel of Tullochgorum* and *The Ewie wi' the Crookit Horn* are still found in anthologies. His son, William Skinner, was a man of liberal sentiments, and Bishop of Aberdeen, and would soon be episcopal Primate of Scotland. So in 1784 William Skinner and two other Scottish bishops laid their right hands on the head of Dr. Seabury, a Connecticut Yankee, thus turning him into a bishop too. The blessing which Jesus once bestowed on Saint Peter could now

be carried across the Atlantic in a contagious form.

On Monday morning the 24th May 1973 Bill Skinner, a last descendent of the episcopal Skinners, died of heart failure in Gartnavel General Hospital, Glasgow, at the age of sixty-nine. The family fortune had trickled very thin by the time it reached Bill. His father, a robust but feckless man, had been educated at Heidelberg University and then lumberjacked and bummed his way across America before ending his days in the Town Clerk's office of Glasgow Corporation. When Bill left school he entered the shipyards as a marker-off, chalking points on steel plates where the rivet-holes were to be cut. Retiring with heart-disease in the 1940s he worked thereafter as a part-time laboratory assistant in a private college which crammed people for the University entrance exams. When that closed in the mid sixties he lived frugally on his National Insurance pension. He never married, spending most of his life with his widowed mother at their home in Otago Street, in what was surely the last gas-lit tenement flat in Glasgow. He had no children. His only surviving relative had been a distant cousin in America.

These are the bare statistical bones of Skinner's life, and one could be excused for thinking them bleak. The living reality was wonderfully different. Bill filled his life with such various imaginative activities – political, artistic, scientific, alchemical – that he became a source of delight and satisfaction to an unusually wide circle of friends. He was a member of the Andersonian Society, the Connolly Association, the CND, an American scientific correspondence society, and the Scottish-USSR Friendship Society.

His Otago Street home had a small laboratory where he did research into Particle Compression and the

Origins of Life, printing (at his own expense) a small pamphlet setting out his views on these subjects. Anyone who cared to make an appointment would be shown over the small museum he had constructed in his mother's front parlour, with its fossils, pressed plants, the headphones powered by body electricity, the transparent seagull's skull and his exhibition of paintings. On average he produced two paintings a year: clear-edged, mysteriously coloured little symbolic works with names like "Scotia Aspires", "Tyro Wizard Town" and "Death of Death". I once heard him grow highly indignant with a critic who called him a Primitive. He thought this was a slur on his meticulous technique. Even in his last years, when badly crippled with arthritis, he produced, with the help of friends, two editions of the magazine *Anvil Sparks*, in which he wrote science, art and political notes, advertised the exhibitions of friends, and serialized the career of Henry Dwining, the alchemist in Scott's novel *The Fair Maid of Perth*, a character with whom he felt great sympathy.

Before illness confined him to the house he was an alert, quick, small boyish man with nutcracker nose and chin, and a mop of pale nicotine-coloured hair. Apparently it had once been bright red. When this faded he tried reviving the colour with a concoction of his own, but without much success. His pubs were the State Bar, the Blythswood Bar and the Pewter Pot before they were modernised. His favourite drinks were vodka with lime and High-Ho, another invention of his which he distilled from pharmaceutical alcohol. It was only brought out at Hogmanay, and a small glass of it diluted by three parts of water to one and flung in the fire could still produce dangerous explosions. He was cheerful, utterly independent, had many friends of both sexes and all ages, and not one enemy. He *succeeded* in life.

Some time in 1940, when working in the yards, he became a founder of a political party which drew its members mainly from the Anarchist, Trotskyite and Nationalist blocs. At the end of his life he was its only member, and he advanced its principles by fixing (with immense caution) small stickers to trees and lamp-posts in the quieter parts of the city near his home. The slogan on these stickers makes a good epitaph, and can be printed in full:

**SCOTTISH
SOCIALIST
REPUBLIC**

NEUTRALITY

To the left of "neutrality" is a small thistle.

A Report to the Trustees of the Bellahouston Travelling Scholarship

I apologize to the Bellahouston trustees, and to Mr Bliss, the director of Glasgow art school, for the long time I have taken to write this report. Had the tour gone as planned they would have received, when I returned, an illustrated diary describing things done and places visited. But I visited very few places and the things I did were muddled and absurd. To show that, even so, the tour was worth while, I must report what I learned from it. I have had to examine my memory of the events deductively, like an archaeologist investigating a prehistoric midden. It has taken a year to understand what happened to me and the money between October 1957 and March 1958.

On learning I was awarded the scholarship my first wish had been to travel on foot or bicycle, sketching landscapes and cityscapes around Scotland, for I knew very little of it apart from Glasgow, two islands in the Firth of Clyde, and places seen on daytrips to Edinburgh. However, a condition of the scholarship was that I go abroad. I decided to visit London for a fortnight, travel from there to Gibraltar by ship, find a cheap place to live in southern Spain, paint there as long as the money would allow, then travel home through Granada, Málaga, Madrid, Toledo, Barcelona and Paris, viewing on the way Moorish mosques, baroque

cathedrals, plateresque palaces, the works of El Greco, Velázquez and Goya, with Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, Brueghel's *Triumph of Death*, and several other grand gaudy things which are supposed to compensate for the crimes of our civilization. The excellence of this plan, approved by Mr Bliss, is not lessened by the fact that I eventually spent two days in Spain and saw nothing of interest.

On the 31st of October I boarded the London train in Glasgow Central Station. It was near midnight, dark and drizzling, and to save money I had not taken a sleeping car. The prospect of vivid sunshine, new lands and people should have been very exciting, but as the train sped south a sullen gloom settled upon me. I looked at my reflection in the rain-streaked carriage window and doubted the value of a tourist's shallow experience of anywhere. I was homesick already. I do not love Glasgow much, I sometimes actively hate it, but I am at home here. In London this sickness increased until it underlay quite cheerful feelings and weighed so heavy on the chest that it began to make breathing difficult. I had been in hospital with asthma during the three previous summers, but a doctor treating me had said another very bad attack was unlikely and a trip abroad might do me good. I had a pocket inhaler which eased difficult breathing with puffs of atropine methontrate, papaverine hydrochloride, chlorbutal and adrenaline; and for strong spasms I had a bottle of adrenaline solution and a hypodermic needle to inject myself subcutaneously. In London I slept in a students' hostel in a street behind the university tower. The dormitory was not large and held about fifty bunks, all occupied. I was afraid to use the inhaler at night in case the noise of it wakened someone, so used the needle, which should have been kept for emergencies. This made sleep difficult. At night I felt trapped in that dormitory and by day I felt trapped in London.

The main shops and offices in London are as large as ours, sometimes larger, but the dwelling houses are mostly of brick and seldom more than half the height of a Scottish sandstone tenement. Such buildings, in a country town surrounded by meadows, look very pleasant, but a big county of them, horizon beyond horizon beyond horizon, is a desert to me, and not less a desert for containing some great public buildings and museums. I visited these oases as the trustees would have wished, but had continually to leave them for a confusion of streets of which my head could form no clear map. Like most deserts this city is nearly flat and allows no view of a more fertile place. The streets of central Glasgow are also gripped between big buildings but it is always easy to reach a corner where we can see, on a clear day, the hills to the north and to the south. I know I am unfair to London. A normal dweller there has a circle of acquaintance about the size of a small village. Only a stranger feels challenged to judge the place as a whole, which cannot be done, so the stranger feels small and lonely. I visited several publishers with a folder of drawings and a typescript of my poems. I hoped to be asked to illustrate a book, perhaps my own book. I was kindly received and turned away from each place, and although I could not feel angry with the publishers (who would have been out of business if they had not known what was saleable) I turned my disappointment against the city. I grew more asthmatic and walked about refusing to be awed.

The least awesome place I saw was the government church, Westminster Abbey. This once fine Gothic structure is filled with effigies of landlords, company directors and administrators who got rich by doing exactly what was expected of them, and now stand as solid in their marble wigs, boots and waistcoats as the Catholic saints and martyrs they have replaced. Among them is an occasional

stone carved with the name of someone who has been creative or courageous. A less pretentious but nastier place is the Tower of London. Built by the Normans for the enslavement of the English natives (who before this had been a comparatively democratic and even artistic people, judging by their export of illuminated manuscripts to the continent) this fort was used by later governments as an arsenal, jail and bloody police-station. Nobody pretends otherwise. The stands of weapons and the pathetic scratchings of the political prisoners on their cell-walls are clearly labelled, and folk who would feel discomfort at a rack of police-batons or the barbed fence of a concentration camp feel thrilled because these are supposed to be part of a *splendid* past. The tower also holds the Crown jewels. There were more of them than I had imagined, twelve or fifteen huge display cabinets of crowns, orbs, maces, swords and ceremonial salt-cellars. Most of it dates from the eighteenth century – I recall nothing as old as the regalia of the sixth Jamie Stewart in Edinburgh castle. I noticed that the less the monarchs were working politicians the more money was spent ornamenting them. The culmination of this development is the huge Crown Imperial, an art nouveau job created for the coronation of Edward the Fat in 1901, when the Archbishop of Canterbury placed the world's most expensively useless hat on the world's most expensively useless head.

Did anything in London please me? Yes: the work of the great cockneys, the Williams Blake and Turner. Also Saint Paul's Cathedral. Also the underground rail system. I found this last, with the H.G. Wellsian sweep of its triple escalators and lines of framed, glazed advertisements for films and women's underwear, and tunnels beneath tunnels bridging tunnels, and tickets which allow those who take the wrong train to find their way to the right station without paying extra, a very great comfort.

But I was glad one morning to get on a boat-train at Liverpool Street Station and begin the second part of the journey to Spain. I was in the company of Ian McCulloch, who had arrived from Glasgow that morning. He is an artist who received his painting diploma at the same time as myself. He also wanted to visit Spain, and had saved the money to do so by working as a gas lamplighter near Parkhead Forge, Shettleston. We had arranged to travel together and meant to share the rent of a small place in south Spain. The boat-train ran along embankments above the usual streets of small houses, then came to a place where towering structures, part warehouse and part machine, stood among labyrinths of railway-siding. The little brick homes were here also, but the surrounding machinery gave them the dignity of outposts. We arrived at the docks.

The ship was called the *Kenya Castle* and long before it unmoored we found it a floating version of the sort of hotel we had never been in before. Our cabin was small but compact. It held two bunks the size of coffins, each with a reading lamp and adjustable ventilator. There was a very small sink with hot and cold water, towels, facecloths, soap, a locker with coat-hangers, a knob to ring for the steward, another for the stewardess. In the lavatories each closet contained, beside the roll of toilet paper, a clean towel, presumably to wipe the fingers on after using the roll, although there were washbasins and towels in the vestibule outside. (It has just struck me that perhaps the extra towel was for polishing the lavatory seat before use.) The menus in the dining room embarrassed us. They were printed on glazed-surface card and decorated at every meal with a different photograph of some nook of Britain's African empire — *The Governor's Summer Residence, Baliwoo Protectorate, The District Vice-Commissioner's Bungalow, Janziboola*, etc. The food, however, was listed in French.

Obviously some foods were alternatives to others, while some could, and perhaps should, be asked for on the same plate. We wanted to eat as much as possible to get the full value of the money we had paid; at the same time we feared we would be charged extra if we ate more than a certain amount. We also feared we would be despised if we asked the waiter for information on these matters. Our table was shared with two priests, Catholic and Anglican. Ian and I were near acquaintances rather than friends. With only our nationality, profession and destination in common we left conversation to the priests. They mainly talked about an audience the Anglican had had with the Pope. He addressed the Catholic with the deference a polite salesman might show to the representative of a more powerful firm. He said the Pope's hands were beautifully shaped, he had the fingers of an artist, a painter. Ian and I glanced down at our own fingers. Mine had flecks of paint on the nails that I hadn't managed to clean off for the previous fortnight.

After this meal coffee was served in the lounge. The cups were very small with frilled paper discs between themselves and the saucers to absorb the drips. There were many people in the lounge but it was big enough not to seem crowded. Darkness had fallen and we were moving slowly down the Thames. There were magazines on small tables: *Vogue, House and Garden, John O'London's, Punch*, the magazines found in expensive dentists' waiting rooms, nothing to stimulate thought. I played a bad game of chess with Ian and ordered two whiskies, which were cheap now we were afloat. I took mine chiefly to anaesthetize the asthma, but Ian felt bound to respond by ordering another two, and resented this. He had less money than I and he thought we were starting the trip extravagantly. The ship was leaving the estuary for the sea. I felt the floor of that opulent lounge, till now only troubled by a buried throbbing, take on a quality of sway. I was distracted from the

weight on my chest by an uneasy, flickering lightness in my stomach. I left the lounge and went to bed, vomiting first into the cabin sink.

While eating breakfast next morning I watched the portholes in the walls of the saloon. The horizon was moving up and down each of them like the bottom edge of a blind. When the horizon was down nothing could be seen outside but pale grey sky. After a few seconds it would be pulled up and the holes would look on nothing but dark grey water. The priests' conversation seemed unforgivably banal. I felt homesick, seasick and asthmatic. I went back to bed and used my inhaler but it had stopped having effect. I took a big adrenaline jag. That night breathing became very difficult indeed, I could not sleep and injections did not help much. The impossibility of sitting up in the bunk, the narrowness of the cabin and the movement of the floor increased my sense of suffocation. I lost all memory of normal breathing, and so lost hope of it. However, I could clearly imagine how it would feel to be worse, so fear arrived. Fear lessened the ability to face pain, which therefore increased. At this stage it was hard to stop the fear swelling into panic, because the more pain I felt the more I could imagine. The only way to divert my imagination from its capital accumulation of fear was to think about something else and only erotic images were strong enough to be diverting. Having no experience of sexual satisfaction I recalled women in the London underground advertisements.

Next morning I asked Ian to call the ship's doctor, who entered the cabin and sat beside the bunk. He was an elderly friendly Scotsman, straight-spined, red-faced and silver-moustached. His uniform had several rings of braid round the cuffs. His speech was all sudden, decided statements interrupted by abrupt silences in which he sat erect, gripping his knees with his hands and looking at the air in

front of his eyes. He felt my pulse, touched me with a stethoscope, agreed that I was asthmatic and went away. After a while a nurse came and gave me an intravenous injection which made me slightly better. Later that day Ian told me it was quite warm on deck and a whale had been sighted. The following day the doctor came back, sat erect beside me and asked how I felt. I said a bit better, I hoped to get up soon. He said abruptly, "How are your bowels?" I said I had no trouble with them. He sat in a tranced rigid silence for a while, then said suddenly, "Buy a tin of Eno's salts from the ship's store. Use them regularly," and left.

That night I developed an obstruction of the throat which coughing could not shift nor spitting reduce. Erotic images brought no relief though I tried to remember the most shameful parts of all the obscene things I had ever heard or read. Next day I asked again to see the doctor. He told me I had pneumonia and must be taken to the ship's hospital. He left and then the medical orderly came with a wooden wheeled chair. I panicked while being put in it, my mind crumbled for a few moments and I became quite babyish. I was not slapped but I was shouted at. Then I made my body as tense in the chair as possible in order to hold the mind in one piece. I was trundled along narrow corridors into the hospital where the nurse and orderly put me in a real bed. I was able to be calmer there. The hospital was a neat, bright little room with four beds and small flower-patterned curtains round the portholes. I asked for an intravenous injection of adrenaline. The nurse explained that this would not help pneumonia. She tied a small oxygen cylinder to the head of the bed and gave me a mask connected to it by a rubber tube. This helped a little. The orderly brought a form, asked several questions and filled it in. My religion puzzled him. I said I was agnostic and his pencil dithered uncertainly above a blank space. I spelled the word out but he wrote down "agnoist". Ian came and I

dictated a letter to my father to be posted from Gibraltar. A radio telegram had been sent to him and I wanted to mitigate any worry it might cause. I noticed nothing special in Ian's manner but later he told me he had difficulty restraining his tears. The doctor had diagnosed pneumonia with probable tuberculosis, and said it would be a miracle if I reached Gibraltar alive. While we were at work on the letter the doctor entered with a man wearing a uniform like his own. This stranger looked on with a faint embarrassed smile while the doctor spoke to me in a loud cheery bonhomous Scottish way. "Aye, Alasdair, keep your heart up!" he cried, "Remember the words of Burns: 'The heart's aye the part aye that maks us richt or wrang'."

"Just so, Doctor, just so," I said, playing up to him. He told me that I would be shifted to a land-hospital next morning when the ship reached Gibraltar, meanwhile (and here he looked at the dial on my oxygen cylinder) I'd better go easy on the oxygen, I'd used up half a tube already and there was only one left in the store. The two visitors went away and the nurse told me the other man was the captain.

After that life was hard for a while. I finished one oxygen cylinder and started on the last, which had forty minutes of comfortable breathing in it. It was difficult to disperse these forty minutes through the eighteen hours before we reached Gibraltar, sleep was impossible and I was afraid of becoming too tired to make myself breathe. During this time I was well cared for by the nurse and the orderly. She was a plain, slightly gawky, serious, very pleasant young woman. She gave me penicillin injections and clean towels to wipe away my sweat. The orderly was a blockily built smallish sturdy man with a clumsy amiable face. He gave me a large brandy at nine in the evening and another at midnight. I felt these two were completely dependable people. At one in the morning the doctor came in wearing

dress uniform. I had never seen a celluloid shirt front before. He leant over the bed, breathed some fumes in my face and asked, with an effort at cheeriness, how I felt. I said I was afraid, and in pain. He indicated the oxygen mask, told me to use it if I got worse and hurried out. The cylinder was almost empty. When it was completely empty I rang the bell behind my bed. The orderly ran in at once in his pyjamas. I asked for more brandy, and got it. This did not lessen the pain but made me unable to think clearly about it. I may or may not have rung the bell for other brandies, my subsequent memories are muddled. I remember just one incident very clearly. The nurse entered wearing a flower-patterned long dressing-gown and seeming very beautiful. She looked at the empty cylinder, felt my brow then went away and brought in another cylinder. I laughed and shook her hand and I am sure she smiled. I felt an understanding between us: she and I were in alliance against something dismal. I don't know if she had disobeyed the doctor in giving me the third cylinder. Maybe he had very few and wanted to keep a certain number in case someone else needed them on the voyage.

Later the ship's engine stopped and I knew we were at Gibraltar. I think this was about five in the morning. I don't recall who did it but I was shifted to a stretcher, wrapped up as snugly and tightly as an Egyptian mummy, carried into a bare kind of cabin and left on the floor. The stretcher had little legs which kept it above the planks. My breathing was easier now and I was beginning to feel comfortable. The doctor, in ordinary uniform, stood nearby looking out of a porthole. He was less drunk than when he had visited me in the night but mellow and communicative. I saw now that his erect abrupt manner disguised a wonderfully controlled, almost continual intoxication. I felt very friendly toward him and he toward me. He sighed and said, "There she is - Gibraltar - under the moon. I never thought to see

her again, Alasdair, I forget how many years it is since I last saw her."

"Were you in practice ashore?"

"This National Health Service is rotten Alasdair. Forms to be filled, paperwork, the pen never out of your hand. In the old days the doctor worked with a stethoscope in one hand and a s.s.s, a scalpel in the other. How do you feel?"

"A lot better."

"You've come through a bad time, Alasdair, a very bad time a Catholic priest told me I was a lost soul last night."

He looked out of the porthole again then said, "I was married once. The girl died a month after the wedding."

"Do you think I could have another brandy?"

"Would ye not like a whisky? I can give ye a good Glenlivet."

I won't pretend the doctor used these exact words but he referred to these things in the order I have recorded them, and stuttered on the s of scalpel, making me imagine a surgical knife vibrating in a trembling fist. Later we heard the chugging of a small boat. He said, "That's the lighter," and went out and came in again with three seamen and a Spanish doctor, a broad, duffle-coated, rimless-spectacled, crew-cut, laconic man. He spoke quietly to the ship's doctor, tested me with a stethoscope then left, refusing the offer of a drink. I heard the chugging of the boat going away.

I was shifted into hospital later that morning in bright sunshine. I was still wrapped tightly on the stretcher with only my face exposed. I felt comfortable, privileged and so incurious I did not try to see anything not directly above my eyes. I saw a section of the high side of the ship against a pale blue sky. I heard a babble of voices and felt a hard cold breeze on my cheek. I think I recall the top of a white mast or flagstaff with a wind-taut flag on it. This must have been

aboard the lighter. Sometimes my upward view was irregularly framed by downward-staring faces: the doctor, Ian, customs officers and strangers. Once the lined dry face of a middle-aged lady looked down for a moment, smiled and said, "I say, you hev hed a bit of bed luck, you've come rathah a croppah, heven't you," and some other terse kindly things full of English-hunting-field stoicism. I liked her for her kindness, and for being so easy to classify. I saw the wooden ceiling of a customs shed, the low steel ceiling of an ambulance, and then, after a ten-minute sound of fast uphill car-travel, the cream ceiling of a hospital vestibule. In this way I arrived in Gibraltar without seeing the rock. Indeed, since leaving London, I had only once seen the sea, through portholes, during the first breakfast afloat. I was now put to bed under a suspended bottle of cortisone solution, which dripped down through a rubber tube into my arm. I was visited by the hospital chief, the laconic doctor who had examined me on board the ship. He said, "You are suffering, of course, from a bad but perfectly ordinary asthma attack. I was sure of that as soon as I saw you this morning, but could not say so. You understand, of course, that it is against professional etiquette to question the decision of a colleague."

The ward was three times longer than broad with eight beds to each long wall. The wall facing me was all window from pillow-level to ceiling. I saw through it a glassed-in veranda containing a few beds and beyond that the water of a wide bay. The hospital stood high up so steep a slope that I could see only the top of the building in front, two elegant towers faced with biscuit-coloured plaster. Far beyond and below these the bay had several sorts of ship moored in it, protected by long breakwaters with cranes on them. Distance made the ships look too small even to be useful toys while the breakwaters, exceptional bits of engineering to surround such a great body of water,

seemed a few lines of forlorn geometry drawn upon it. The far side of the bay was all hills and small mountains with the whitish jumble of a town along the coast at their foot. This was Spain.

Although the head doctor was Spanish the routine and discipline of the hospital was British, the matron was a Scot, and of the three sisters two were English and one Welsh. The nurses were small plump Spanish or Gibraltar girls, and most of the patients were Gibraltar: that is, bilingual Spaniards who lived on the rock. They were inclined to be middle-aged and gaunt. There was a Velázquez-type dwarf called Paco with a calm, smooth, dignified face and slightly amused mouth. He would stand beside a bed resting his folded arms on it and talking quietly to the occupant in Spanish, or just leaning his brow on his folded arms. To my right was Major Mellors, elderly, gaunt and hawk-nosed. Facing me across the ward was Sigurdson, a taciturn humorous ship's mate from Lancashire. I learned the names and manners of these people gradually. The inmates of a hospital ward observe their neighbours closely but avoid, at first, contacting them, for each is too engrossed by their own illness to want the burden of sympathizing with someone else.

During my first week in hospital I was visited regularly by Ian, who had taken lodgings in Gibraltar, but after finding I was out of danger he set off into Spain. He was going to the village of Estepona a few hours journey up the coast, for he had heard good reports of it. He meant to find decent rooms there, settle in, and I would join him when I left the hospital. I made him take two pounds to compensate him for some of the money he had lost by the delay. The day after he left for Spain I was surprised to see him enter the ward. He sat by my bed and explained that he did not like Spain.

"It's so unhygienic, Alasdair. I got off the bus at Estepona and set out to find a place to stay, but the flies! I travelled everywhere inside this cloud of flies. I mean, it was ridiculous. And the children who kept following me, begging, were almost as hard to shake off. And everybody stared. I mean, they didn't do it sideways or behind your back, they stood still in the street and really looked at you. I found a place. I won't describe the sanitation because there wasn't any. I went out for a drink with a bloke I had met in the bus. We went into a bar and ordered wine at the counter. Before pouring it out the barman put down two wee plates each with a wee dirty bit of fish on it. I mean, we were expected to eat that. The counter was filthy – nothing was properly clean. I mean, outside the village you get these farm buildings with nice white walls, very picturesque. And when you go near you see the ground covered with little heaps of shit. They must just have squatted in the shadow to get rid of it."

"What was the countryside like?" I asked.

"Oh, it's picturesque all right. I mean, it's beautiful in a queer way. You get these low brownish hills in the dusk with a line of donkeys and their riders going along the top against a fantastic sunset. I mean it might grow on you. But I realize now that what I want to paint is in Scotland. I don't think I've wasted my money if I've discovered that. I think I'll use what's left to do some painting up the East coast, in Fife or Angus. Maybe I'll call in at Paris on the way home." I won't pretend Ian used these exact words but he talked in that style and mentioned these things. Three days later he got on a boat which took him to France.

I was not unhappy in that hospital. The staff kept pain out of me with doses and injections. I was nursed, fed and allowed to live completely to myself. The homesickness seemed to have been burned out by my experience aboard ship. Sometimes a faint "Over the graves of the martyrs the

whaups are crying, my heart remembers how" feeling drifted through my mind like faint smoke, but that was romantic nostalgia, nothing like the earlier sick hunger for Glasgow and those I knew there. This new equanimity came partly from the routine of hospital, which was familiar to me, but there was another reason.

A few years earlier I had begun work on a tragicomical novel and meant to write some more of it in Spain. In my luggage was a Cantablue Expanding Wallet, a portable cardboard filing cabinet shaped like an accordion and holding two complete chapters and the notebooks and diaries from which I meant to make the rest. I put this on my bedside locker and began working. I was slightly ashamed of this activity, which struck me as presumptuous and banal: presumptuous because, like Scott Fitzgerald, I believed the novel was the strongest and supplest medium for conveying thought and emotion from one human being to another, which meant that a novelist needed to understand great states of feeling, and although twenty-three years old I had never known carnal love and feared I never would; banal because one or two friends had also started writing a novel, and the rest had thought of writing one. So when the nurses asked what I was doing I lied and told them I was writing this report. But actually I was in Glasgow, the Glasgow of my childhood and adolescence and studenthood, and far more at home there than when I underwent these painful states, for now my mind hovered above the person I had been in perfect safety, without affection but with great curiosity. I found that person unpleasant but comic and was fascinated by the things and people it knew. My world was confused, shabby and sad, but had as much order, variety, good feeling and potency as any other. I tried to write an ordinary, easily-read language which showed the sadness and shabbiness but made the other things (which keep us alive) equally evident. While I

worked at this writing I enjoyed the best happiness of all, the happiness which does not notice itself, until, stopping, we feel tired and see that an hour has passed like a minute, and know we have done as well as we can, and perhaps one day someone will be glad. I am sure this happiness is not rare. Everyone feels a little of it who makes or keeps something useful in the world, and does not just work for money and promotion. I suspect there is more of this happiness among skilled manual workers than in higher income groups, who have other satisfactions.

I was not shut completely into my head. I often looked out across the bay. Hospitals are generous with pillows to their asthmatic patients and I could see the coast of Spain without raising my head. On bright afternoons a few long wisps of white vapour would trickle up into the sky from wide-apart points on the sides of the mountains. Perhaps it was a memory of old fairy-tales that made me think this smoke came from the huts of charcoal-burners. I tried to imagine myself wandering there and totally failed. Gibraltar has one of the Mediterranean's moister climates and the view was often blotted out by low cloud. I also had an understanding with Major Mellors based upon definite but minimum communication. During the morning I might say, "Was it all right to tip the barber?"

"Yes. How much did you give him?"

"Ninepence."

"That was too much."

In the afternoon he might remark, on a wistful note, "I wonder how my garden's getting on."

"Is there nobody looking after it?"

"Oh yes, my servant Ali."

"Won't he look after it properly?"

"Oh yes, he's very good with flowers."

But the most sociable time was between the half-past-five cup of tea and the seven o'clock breakfast when Sister

Price sat at a table at our end of the ward. She was bright and talkative, and Sigurdson and the Major and I would interject and pass comments which seemed to us all increasingly witty and humorous. Yet I cannot now recall a single thing we said. The base of the conversation was four very different people wanting to enjoy and please each other and succeeding. For the rest of the day we were friendly in a quiet way which later struck me as British, or even European, when Mr Sweeney arrived.

He was the first mate of a big American ship and was put in an empty bed beside Sigurdson. Had his flesh been firm he would have been a broad tough middle-aged man, but his cheeks were pouchy, he had a pouch under each eye, when not talking his mouth drooped to the left as if his muscles only kept hold of the right-hand corner. But he was usually talking because he could only think aloud. We learned he had a wife in America he seemed not to like much, and a daughter called Baby, living with the wife, whom he liked a great deal. "She's well over forty, she's twice divorced, but she'll always be my Baby."

He was a Christian Scientist and said he had only come to hospital because the company he served could take away his pension if he refused. When disease or death was mentioned he would shrug and say, "After all, what is the body? Just fifty cents-worth of chemicalization."

If a silence lasted too long for him he sometimes broke it by remarking, at random, "After all, the only realities are spiritual realities."

Beneath his bed were three large cases from which he got the hospital porter to produce, at various times, many electrical gadgets connected with hygiene and grooming, cigars, tissues, a radio, three ball-pens which wrote in different colours, and a steel-barrelled pen filled with spirit ink to which could be fixed several thicknesses of felt nib. He did not converse. He might call one of us by name, but

his loud, even voice was clearly addressing our entire half of the ward. Once he called out, "Say, Major! Could you lend me just a small spoonful of that toothpowder of yours and tomorrow I'll give you back a whole tin of it?"

"What's that, old man?" said the Major, maybe playing for time.

"Could you lend me one little spoonful of that toothpowder of yours and tomorrow I'll repay you with a whole big new tin of it? I got one in the case."

"Oh you mustn't give away all your pretty things like that," said the Major, gently.

"Major, when I'm tired of giving I'll be tired of living. If people are grateful, well and good. If not"

He frowned, his mouth sagged into its expression of slightly puzzled vacuity and for some minutes his eyes searched the ward uneasily for something to think about. At last they focused on a point beneath the table where the sister wrote her reports. "Say!" he said, brightening, "That's the saddest waste-paper basket I ever did see! It's twisted, it's all to cock, it needs a new coat of paint" and then he ran out of thoughts again and eventually muttered that the only realities were spiritual realities.

We were fascinated by Sweeney because he continually presented himself, which none of us did. At first meeting our accents had shown each other that Sigurdson was a Lancashire seaman, the Major an English army officer and I a well-read lowland Scot. The humorous prebreakfast chats had confirmed this without adding detail. I knew the Major had commanded the household troops of some Moroccan or Algerian ruler, but had not heard it from his lips. He must have noticed that I was writing something larger than this report but my privacy did not disturb him. Mr Sweeney gave us his whole childhood in half a minute.

"For the first twelve years of my life I was reared by my

mother and wow, you should have seen me. Blue velvet suit. Satin shirt and necktie. Curly hair down to my shoulders. She had just about made a little girl of me when my pa came and took me to sea with him. She didn't want it, I didn't want it, but he said, 'You're gonna cry your eyes out but one day you'll be grateful.' And I cried. I guess I cried myself to sleep almost every night for six whole months. But after a year I was tough, I was a man, and I was grateful."

He was not embarrassed by his sexuality. One day the Major asked what he thought of the Japanese.

"I like 'em. Collectively they're skunks but individually I like 'em. I remember my ship putting into Yokohama in thirty-six. The Mayor entertained a few of us. I like Japanese homes. They're clean. No furniture; you sit on mats on the floor. Nothing like that - " he pointed to the top of his locker which, like our lockers, was littered with many more or less useful objects - "All that stuff is kept in a smooth box in the corner of the room. And there's not much decoration either. But the room is built round an almond tree that comes out of a hole in the floor and goes out through one in the ceiling and the trunk and branches in the room have been given a coat of clear not varnish, but like varnish"

"Lacquer?" I suggested.

"Yeah. They're lacquered. Well, nothing was too good for us. They saw we didn't like their drink so without even asking they sent out for whisky. And when I went to bed, there she was. In a kimono. There are over fifty yards of silk in those kimonos. By the time she'd unwrapped herself I had almost lost my courage."

One day it was announced on the wireless that President Eisenhower had burst a small blood-vessel in his brain, his speech was impaired and he was confined to bed. Sweeney heard this with unusual gravity. He said, "He's sixty-two. My age." and was silent for a long time.

"After all," he said suddenly, "He's an old man. What can you expect?"

He complained of headache. The nurse on duty told him it would go away. "But what's causing it?" he demanded, "That's what I want to know. What's causing it?"

He called the sister, then the matron, who both told him a codeine tablet would cure it. "I won't take dope!" he cried, "You aren't going to dope me!"

He huddled silently under the bedclothes for over an hour. "After all," he said suddenly, "He's old. He's not indispensable, even if he is the president. He'll be replaced one day, just like the rest of us."

He clearly wanted to be persuaded that what he said was untrue. The Major and I kept glancing at each other with furtive, delighted grins, but we were glad when Eisenhower got well enough to make a speech and Mr Sweeney felt better. He was more entertaining when he was confident.

The trustees may wonder why I have spent so many words describing this man. I do so for reasons that would have made me describe Toledo, had I reached Toledo. He displayed a coherent kind of life. I admired his language, which was terse, rapid, and full of concrete detail. I realized this was part of his national culture and found an impure form of it in an American magazine he read each week with great seriousness. "Everything in this is fact," he explained, "It prints nothing but the bare facts. Other magazines give you opinions. Not this one."

I borrowed it and read a report of the British Labour Party conference. One of the leaders had tried to persuade the Party that bits of Britain should not be leased to the U.S.A. as bases for their nuclear weapons. Under a photograph of him looking pugnacious were the words "Number one American-hater, rabble-rousing Aneurin Bevan".

But I admired Mr Sweeney quite apart from his national style. With energy, skill, and a total absence of what I

thought of as intellectual reserves (a developed imagination, analytical subtlety, wide reading) he had managed ships and men in two world wars and the Korean war. He had worked and enjoyed himself and taken knocks among the solid weights and wide gaps of the world I would not face. Death worried him now that his body was failing, but since the age of twelve he had never been embarrassed by life. And by wrestling with the fear of death openly and aloud he made it a public comedy instead of a private terror. Aboard the *Kenya Castle*, when I was afraid of dying, my fear did nobody any good.

Of course, I had to face the world in the end. Only everlasting money can keep us from doing that, and mine was being used up. Each day in hospital cost me twenty-one shillings and I had been over three weeks there. When to that was added the train fare to London, and cost of lodgings there, boat fare to Gibraltar, ship's hospital fee, the price of the ambulance journey and being X-rayed for tuberculosis, and the small sum I had forced upon Ian, I found I had spent, or else owed, more than half the scholarship money. I recalled, too, that I had never been discharged from hospital feeling perfectly well. It was possible that something in the nature of hospitals pandered to my asthma after the worst of an attack had been cured by them. I asked to see the head doctor and explained that, for financial reasons, I must leave next morning. He shrugged and said, "It cannot be helped." He advised me, though, not to leave Gibraltar until I felt healthier, and even so not to go far into Spain in case I had another attack, as in Spain the hospital charges were extortionate, especially to tourists, and the medical standards were not high. This seemed sensible advice. I asked the nurses for the name of a lodging which was cheap, plain and good. I heard there was an armed-forces leave centre in the south bastion which usually had spare beds, was run by a retired Scottish

soldier, and easy to reach. Next morning I dressed, collected my rucksack, left the hospital doorstep and struck with my feet the first earth I had touched since the port of London.

I was on a road slanting up from the town of Gibraltar to the rock's outermost point. The day must have been clear because across the sea to the south I saw the African coast looking exactly as Africa ought to look: a dark line of crowded-together rock pinnacles, domes and turrets with beyond them, when the eye had grown used to the distance, the snowy range of Atlas holding up the sky. The modern hospital behind me, the elegantly towered building in front (a lunatic asylum) stood on a great slant of white limestone rock interspersed with small tough twisted trees. I turned right and walked to the town, breathing easily because I was going downhill. I came to a wall with an arch in it just wide enough to take two cars, and beyond this the road became the main street of Gibraltar. A small lane leading to the left brought me almost at once to the south bastion.

This was a stone-built cliff protecting the town from the sea. The townward side was pierced by vaulted chambers. The lower ones, which had been barracks, were entered from a narrow piazza; the upper, which had been munition storerooms and gun emplacements, were entered from a balcony. All windows faced the town. High tides had once lapped the other side of this bastion but now a broad road ran here with docks on the far side. The guns and gunners had shifted elsewhere long ago and the chambers were used as a guest-house by the *Toc H*. The *Toc H* (I never learned the reason for that name) developed in France during the First World War, among British soldiers who wanted spiritual communion and found the official army

priests too sectarian and not always near when things got tough. The only communion service was to light a brass oil-lamp in a dark place and pray that human pain would one day produce happiness and peace. Apart from that the organization existed to share extra food, clothing and shelter with whoever seemed in need. Jock Brown, formerly of the Highland Light Infantry in Flanders, was the Toc H man in south bastion. He was small, balding, mild-faced and wore a blazer with a white cross badge on the breast pocket and flannel trousers with bicycle clips at the ankles. His instincts were all turned to being mildly helpful. He believed that youth was a beautiful and noble state but was not surprised when young soldiers brawled, contracted venereal diseases and stole. He liked lending them cameras, books and records in the hope that they would come to enjoy using these instead. With the help of Isabel, a Spanish maid, he kept the hostel tidy and clean, the meals plain yet tasty, the general air of the place as mild as himself. I once heard him called "an old woman" by somebody who thought that a term of abuse. The critic was a man of Jock's age who had not been very useful to other people, so wanted to believe that everyday kindness was an unimportant virtue.

On that first morning Jock led me up a ramp to the balcony and into the commonroom, a former gun-emplacement with a triangular floorplan. A hearth was built into the angle facing the door so that smoke left by the hole through which shells had been fired. The interior stonework was massively rough except for seven feet of smooth wall on each side of the hearth, and later I painted mural decorations here. Jock showed me to a dormitory next door holding four beds and introduced me to room-mates who had not yet risen. These were a private on leave from the Royal Surrey regiment, and an Australian and a German who would both be departing by ship next morn-

ing. I unpacked my things into a locker beside my bed then visited a bank in town where I uplifted the second part of the Bellahouston Scholarship money, the first having been received in Glasgow. I pocketed a few pounds and hid the rest in a plastic envelope containing my shaving-kit.

That night, to obtain sound sleep in a strange bed, I decided to become drunk and found a big crowded bar nearby where I would not be conspicuous. The customers were mostly soldiers and sailors but there were women among them. A small plump one approached and asked if I would like a *compañera*? I said I would. She sat beside me, called a waiter and ordered a glass of pale green liquid, for which I paid. She was Spanish and her English was too poor to tell me much else. She tried to be entertaining by folding a handkerchief into the shape of what she called *pantalones* and unfastening the flies, but I did not find this exciting or feel she wished to seduce me. With each green drink I bought, the waiter handed her a small brass disc. When she went to the lavatory I tasted what was in her glass and found it to be coloured water. I got the waiter to refill the glass with green chartreuse but when she returned and sipped this she grew thoughtful and depressed, then left me. Clearly the management paid her no commission on the real drinks I purchased. So I drank by myself and listened to a small, very noisy band. It played a round of tunes chosen to cause nostalgia in as many customers as possible: *Maybe It's Because I'm a Londoner*, *Men of Harlech*, *Galway Bay*, etc. The Scottish number, *I Belong to Glasgow*, was repeated every ten minutes. It is not a tune I normally like but in this place it induced an emotion so heartrending that I had to grapple with it as if it were a disease. However, I stayed drinking until I was sure my head would lose consciousness as soon as it touched a pillow, then returned to the dormitory (which was in darkness), undressed, put

the shaving-kit under the pillow, my head on top of it, and did indeed lose consciousness.

I wakened late next morning feeling brighter and healthier than I had done for many weeks. I also felt guilty (the straw mat beside my bed was crusted with vomit) but I knew that a day of brisk sketching or writing would cure that. The English private remained curled below his blankets, the Australian and German had already left to catch their boat. I took my toilet things and the straw mat to the lavatory and washed the mat and myself perfectly clean. Then I dressed and breakfasted, then climbed by an iron ladder to the esplanade on top of the bastion and sat on a shaded bench planning what to do. I still owed money to the hospital. I took my wad of notes from the shaving-kit and found it contained twenty pounds. The rest had been removed.

My instinctive reaction to a painful event is to sit quiet for a very long time, and as I brooded on my position this struck me as an intelligent thing to do. The thief must be one of three people, two of whom were at sea. If I could persuade the police to act for me, which was unlikely, they could do little but spread to others a nasty feeling I had better keep to myself. The thief had left me enough to live on for a while. Although my father was not rich he had some money banked. I wrote him a letter explaining all the circumstances except my intoxication and asking for a loan of the stolen amount, which I promised to repay by taking a regular job when I returned home. He posted the money to me as quickly as he could. The asthma returned. It worsened and improved, then worsened and improved. I remained in the hostel for my twenty-fourth birthday, and the New Year of 1958, and another two months. I wrote five chapters of my book and painted a *Triumph of Neptune* on the commonroom walls.

I also made friends with some rootless people who used the hostel a lot. There was a student from the Midlands who had left Britain to avoid national military service and seemed to live by petty smuggling. There was a tall stooping bronchial man, also from the Midlands, who hovered around the Mediterranean for health reasons. There was a middle-aged American with a sore back who had been refused entry into England where he had gone to consult an osteopath of whom he had heard great things. He kept discussing the reasons for the refusal and wondering if a slight tampering with the datestamp on his passport would make entry easier if he tried again. There was Cyril Hume, an unemployed ableseaman with a photograph of a cheerful, attractive-looking wife in Portsmouth who "realized he needed to wander about a bit". I think it was Cyril Hume who learned that a ship would be sailing to the Canary Isles from a port on the African coast just opposite. Apparently the fare was cheap and the cost of living in the Canary Isles even less than the cost of living in Spain. My health was improving at the time so we all decided to go together. We took a ferry across the bay to Algeciras in Spain, and another ferry from Algeciras to Africa. There was a bright sun and a strong wind, the waves ran fast with glittering foamy crests. The jumbled rocky African coast and a steep promontory with a medieval fortress on it looked theatrical but convincing. Cyril Hume had bought us cheese, celery and bread. Standing in the prow of the ship it suddenly struck me that cheese, celery and precisely this chalky white bread was the best lunch I had ever tasted. Slightly breathless, I produced my medical hand-pump and inhaled from it. The surrounding crowd turned and watched me with that direct, open interest which Ian McCulloch had found upsetting. I enjoyed it. I liked being a stranger who provoked interest without even trying.

The port we reached was Ceuta, a Spanish possession. It looked just like Algeciras: whitewalled buildings and streets bordered by orange trees with real fruit among the leaves. The ship we wanted had left for the Canary Isles the day before so we returned to Algeciras and took lodgings there. Next morning, having slept badly, I decided to stay in bed. After my friends had left a maid entered the room and began making the other beds by shaking up the feather quilts and mattresses. I am allergic to feathers and started suffocating. I cried out to her but had no Spanish and she no English. In my notebook I hastily sketched a feather and told her it was *mal* – I hoped that the Latin root for evil was part of her language too. She smiled and repeated the word with what seemed perfect comprehension and then, when I lay back, relieved, she returned to violently plumping out the quilts. I gripped my hypodermic needle to give myself a big adrenaline injection but my hand trembled and the needle broke short in my flesh. The maid and I both panicked. She screamed and a lot of women ran in and surrounded me, jabbering loudly as I pissed, shat, and grew unconscious.

I wakened in a hospital managed by dark-robed, white-wimpled brides of Christ. A doctor came, gave me pills of a sort that can be bought cheap from any chemist, and charged dear for them. My friends arrived, discharged me, and escorted me back across the bay to Gibraltar and the Toc H hostel, where I stayed in bed for a week. I now had slightly more than ten pounds of money left: enough to buy a cheap boat fare back to London.

One day Jock Brown came to me and said that if I gave him my passport he would get me a ticket for an aeroplane going to London that evening. The ticket cost thirty pounds. Jock did not offer to lend me money. He took my

passport, returned with a ticket and helped me to the airport. I crossed Spain at twice the altitude of Everest. It looked brown and as flat as a map. The only memorable feature was the white circle of the bullring in the middle of each town. London was foggy. I went to the University hospital and was given an intravenous adrenaline injection to help me reach Glasgow by overnight train. At Glasgow Central Station I took a taxi to the Royal Infirmary where I was drugged and sent home by ambulance. The morning was fresh and springlike but I felt no joy in homecoming. Glasgow was as I expected.

And now, to sum up, what good was the tour? What did it teach me? Not much about the world, but a lot about myself. It is evident that I fear to change. We are always changing of course. From the moment of birth we start the alteration and adaption called *growth*. Growth is usually gradual and foreseeable. Our surroundings don't change much and neither do we. But sometimes surroundings change radically and suddenly. A war is declared and we hide with neighbours in a dark shelter with queer noises outside. A mother dies, we must leave school and find a new way of living. We are awarded a scholarship and go to a foreign land in the belly of a posh liner. Such events should have made me grow into a different man. But I was afraid of losing the habits by which I knew myself, so withdrew into asthma. My tour was spent in an effort to avoid the maturity gained from new experiences. Yet in spite of the protective clutter of doctors in which I ended the trip that effort failed. We can accept maturity bravely or panic and kick against it, but eventually some form of maturity is imposed. Before going abroad the idea of teaching art to children appalled me. I have been doing it now for five months, and compared with partial suffocation in a Spanish estancia it is an almost painless activity. I will soon have paid Jock Brown what I owe him, and will then pay my father.

Also, since getting home I have had no more bad asthma attacks, and don't live in fear of them. So the Bellahouston Travelling Scholarship has done me good.

April 1959
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POSTSCRIPT. Wishing to attach to this report photographs of my *Triumph of Neptune* I wrote to Jock Brown asking if he would take and send me some. He answered that this was impossible. Soon after I left the hostel it was visited by the wife of Gibraltar's governor. She felt the naked mermaids and nereids in the commonroom were a bad moral influence upon the soldiers using the place, so her husband asked Jock to paint them out. Jock, who liked my mural, wrote to the Secretary of State for War, Mr Jack Profumo, asking if he need obey the governor's request. Mr Profumo replied that "the man on the spot knows best", by whom he meant, not Jock Brown, but the governor's wife. So Jock, with rage in his heart, covered my mermaids with a coat of khaki paint. It is pleasant to imagine a more liberal age one day restoring them to light.

However, the town of Gibraltar needs room to expand, and in a year or two the south bastion will be demolished.