

The Celebrant and the Celebrated

Blood hesitates before it flows and when it comes it comes like overbrimming tears, spilling in three exquisite streams across the goosebumps on the breast.

I take another sip. Grouse was my father's whisky of choice. Not Bells. Not Haig. Not Teachers. It signified that things had not slipped so far.

It is special: the wound above the nipple, short and deep. Action man had a scar just there. And Hawkeye in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Just there where the pectoral flares out of the ribcage, taut like the capped fury of the Hulk. Blood nips as it thickens then cracks like the parched bed of a desert lake.

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Kimberly was alone on the stage as I entered the hall. I hung back in the shadows at the top of the stairs. I did not wish to distract her.

The girl's body beat frantic time like a thistle in a gale. As she pounded through her hop threes, each leg in turn bent at the knee to form an acute 4 across its partner. The hem of the raw silk dress flounced.

The music ended.

Kimberly froze. Thwarted steps threw tantrums behind the thin grille of her heaving ribs. She bowed from the waist, her face a plea. Annie began the applause. She lurched to her feet, encouraging others near her to join in. I peeled myself from the crowds of shadow and descended the treacherous stairway. Kimberly scooped up her dignity and walked towards the wings.

"Did ye see it?" Annie said.

"Yeah. From up there," I said.

"All of it?"

"Most of it."

"Good. She'll be pleased."

She stretched up to kiss me on the cheek. Her nose stud scratched my face. I pulled back.

"Sorry," she said.

In her rock-chick tee-shirt and tight leggings, Annie was as cram-full of light as a roman candle.

"I'll go see her," she said.

"Fine."

Her doc martens clunked against my ankle as she squeezed past.

The next contestant's name was announced: NATASHA. Natasha stepped to centre stage on straightened legs and turned to face the threadbare audience. The recorded rumble of a borram challenged her to move. She waited. Six bars: point. Nine bars: BEGIN!

NATASHA wasn't very good. Her feet clomped out a gallows jig beneath the anxious drop of her skinny body. Slipped into the magic wardrobe of "how good I am", she danced on a single breath, pent up and running out, the child cocooned in an ecstasy of disappearing. She was invisible. I saw her invisibility, remembered that, and tried to remember the child on stage. It always seemed strange to me how adults never noticed you had gone when you returned. Until eventually you stopped coming back at all, stayed in the

wardrobe, not breathing, with your empty limbs pounding out their steps. Sweat broke out on Natasha's brow. She gasped a breath and stumbled.

Kimberly's half-moon bag was slung over her shoulder and her heavy killakee shoes dangled from her left hand. She and Annie climbed the seating bank.

"Her lead round wasn't right," Annie said.

"How?" I asked.

"She only did seven Jump threes and ended up facing the wrong way."

"I didn't notice," I said.

"Are you sure Kimberly?" Annie asked.

"Yes," the girl replied.

"Oh well."

"But this is my seventh competition," Kimberly said.

"It takes time darling." Annie reached out to ruffle her daughter's synthetic ringlets. "There'll be other competitions."

"I haven't got time mum. I'll not get recalled."

"You might," Annie said. "You don't know how bad the other girls are going to be."

"I don't want recalled just because the other girls are worse! I can count to 8!"

"Well. You didn't," Annie said. "It doesn't matter."

"Not to you! Hi Billy." Kimberly plumped herself into the seat beside me, her wide green skirt flaring out at either side.

"Happy birthday."

"Thank you," I said.

"Get any presents?"

"Not yet," I said.

"Aw. Can we go and celebrate after the feis?"

"Yeah," I said. "Where d'you want to go?"

"Pizza hut."

I said, "You looked fine to me."

"Shows what you know then," Kimberly said.

But I did know. I had learned a lot in the last three weeks, perched on the edge of Annie's sofa watching Kimberly kicking behind her in a drill of jump threes which must have frayed the nerves of Annie's downstairs neighbours. I would count the beats and bars for her: six and point, nine begin. Lead round, first step and back to the centre of the makeshift clearing we had made by pushing the sofa and tv back against the wall.

Kimberly got recalled by the panel but didn't win a prize.

"You're a good man, you know," Annie said.

We were in the Shebaz Tandoori. Draped around my shoulders, Annie smelled of estee lauder and bacardi. Her fingertips tugged playfully at the skin on my throat, as though preparing to peel away layers of loose bandage. Kimberly glared at her mum across the table decorations.

"They have 4 kinds of ice-cream at Pizza Hut with smarties and hundreds and thousands," Kimberly said.

"No," Annie said. "It's Billy's birthday. Billy would prefer a curry. Wouldn't you Billy? My treat."

"I'm easy," I said. "If she'd like a pizza..."

"You can have something mild. And those big crisps. Happy birthday," Annie said.

She laid a CD-shaped package beside my plate. The present was wrapped in silver-grey paper with red lovehearts.

"That's awful good of you," I said.

"Open it."

I didn't want to. I hate unwrapping things. I hate the moment when I realise I am still invisible.

"Go on. It is your birthday. Happy birthday. Traitor!" Kimberly said. I peeled away the covering. It was Jim Reeves' Greatest Hits.

"Jim Reeves?" I said, very pleasantly surprised.

"I guessed," said Annie. "Well. Actually you were humming it the other day."

"Put you sweet lips, a little closer..."

"...to the fo-howwnah."

"Thank you." I supped another inch of lager. "Hey, Kimberly. What flies into mountainsides at 300 miles per hour and sings?"

"I don't know, what flies into mountainsides at 300 miles per hour and sings?"

"Jim Reeves."

Kimberly didn't get it.

"I thought that was a Buddy Holly joke," Annie said.

"It was a Jim Reeves joke first. This is really good. You noticed that? My da used to listen to Jimbo. Used to croon. Adios amigo, adios my friend...can't remember what comes next. Neither could he. Most nights."

"Bad memory."

"In my family, we only sang when we were rat-arsed. That's not true. We sing when we are alone."

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The thigh is also good. Its soft secret surface offers an *unrestricted* expanse across which the scalpel blade can be drawn clean as a sacrament and straight as a ship on a flat calm sea. Red cabochons jewel the surgical steel, held up for examination like a host, while the hot chasm of affirmative sensation drops out below.

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"Come back," Annie said. "Let's celebrate."

We were outside on Sauchiehall Street. It was raining.

"I don't do birthday's Annie," I said. "Never was much call."

"To celebrate?"

"What's to celebrate?"

"Come on back. For a wee while."

"I'll see you home," I said.

We caught the underground from George Cross. The orange plastic train rushed and rattled through the short dark tunnels. Kimberly's half-moon bag took up two seats and Annie and I faced her, playing mirror games with

our reflections in the curving Plexiglas. I looked like a Francis Bacon cardinal.

"So what age is that?" Annie asked.

"Thirty-nine," I said. "Forty next."

"What age do you feel?"

"Eleven. Maybe."

"I'm twenty nine," Annie said.

"But lived in."

"Silver-tongued bastard. Aye, a twenty nine year old tenement block with a burnt out top story, an irish tribe in the first floor right, dogshit up the close and a torched ford cortina by the lockups. But twenty-nine just the same. That's what age I am."

"I think you are being hard on yourself. Twenty-six I'd say."

"No Billy. I don't want to be twenty six," she said.

"In nineteen ninety... three?" I ventured into song.

She nodded.

"It was a very good year, it was a very good year for Parkhead girls..."

"Who'd just got an exclusion order. Anyway. That's Frank Sinatra.

Let's go back to Jim Reeves."

It was a walk from Scotland Street to Annie's flat, down old streets and across empty ground where solitary pubs stand like blockhouses outflanked by time, spaces too poor and desolate even for junkies.

"Kimberly's eleven. You don't seem like an eleven year old," Annie said.

"No. It's the bandages."

"What?"

"Bandages. Like "The Mummy." You can't see through the bandages. Just the eyes."

"I think he's eleven," Kimberly said.

"Why?"

"He prefers pizza to curry really. Don't you?"

"No. I just miss the hundreds and thousands on the ice-cream."

We broke into the warm odiferous fug of Annie's flat. The strip-light in the kitchenette snapped out three whiplashes of brightness then settled down.

Annie said, "Boinnngg says Zebedee. Time for bed!"

"But it's Billy's birthday?"

"Billy's aye: no yours."

"Aw. One more."

"Are you sure it wasn't eight?" I said. "You count fine to eight."

"I want to dance again," Kimberly said.

"Enough," said Annie.

"Once more," I said.

"D'you want a drink?"

"What you got?"

"I got some Grouse," Annie said. "For you birthday."

"That'll do famously. Ready."

In the living room, I used the remote control to start the music.

One and - two and - three and...

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"It's costing me a fortune," Annie said. "The dresses and the travelling to feisannas."

"Why d'you do it?"

"It's her."

Kimberly was in bed. The green silk dress was folded across the arm of the sofa. Jim was crooning *He'll have to go* from his distant mountainside. Our hips swayed left and right and round to the soft waltz-time rhythm. Annie smelt all warm and biryanied. She cuddled close and closed her eyes.

"Happy birthday," she said. "I've decided you get another present."

"Two presents? That seems a bit excessive."

"I decided you deserve it."

"So what is it?" I asked.

"Me," she said.

"Do I get to unwrap it?"

"Deferred gratification Billy. It promotes emotional intelligence in a man."

"It's not really you though is it?"

"Deferred gratification?"

"Irish dance," I said.

"I'm Irish as you are."

"Second generation."

"It's a place to start," she said.

"We should put more coal on that fire," I said.

"It's electric!"

"Exactly."

"You know..." Annie said. "I don't always practice what I preach."

"What about?"

"Safe sex. Stupid."

She clambered up to tip-toe and kissed me. The panic and the want piled up like an avalanche behind me as her mouth opened and the soft strangeness of her tongue slipped out blind and greedy like a maggot.

"Won't Kimberly mind if I stay?"

She arched a pencilled eyebrow. "Who said you were stayin'?"

"Well put the light out," I said.

"No. Take these off...then you can't see." She removed my glasses and threw them towards the sofa.

She reached to unbutton my shirt and my hand stopped her, circling her wrist.

"No," I said but my fingers swept smooth the skin along her ribs and up towards her breast.

"Doesn't feel like no."

"Suppose I said I'm not who I seem to be?"

"I'd say that's a helluva cliché to spring at this late hour. Anyway. I'm a big girl."

"A big twenty-nine year old."

"Molesting little boys. That's right."

"Don't do that."

Her hands slipped down and into the hip pockets of my jeans.

"Come on."

"I'd rather put the light out."

"Don't be ridiculous."

I pulled her down to the floor, to the shadows beside the window, to easy reach of my drink. I broke from her kisses to swallow a gulp of neat whisky.

"You know. When I was wee," I said, "they'd throw the cap in the fire so you had to finish the bottle."

"It would bounce off the plastic," Annie said.

"We ignored that," I said.

The dizzy space of the drink leered away to my left. Annie pulled my attention back and I wormed my hands below her tee-shirt.

"But I do stop short at unprotected sex," she said. "I may be a hypocrite but I'm not stupid. Wait a minute."

My back against the sofa, legs spread wide, I felt untidy and tangled up. The room about was blurry without my glasses. I could just make out the bottle waiting patiently beside the fire. I splashed the tumbler full again and slurped some comfort from the glass.

Annie reappeared with an optimistic abundance of prophylactics.

"Legs together," she said.

"Pardon?"

She straddled my thighs and laid the four foil sachets in a pile beside me.

"Now," she said. "Let's see what we've got."

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The thigh opens like a seam, exposing the thing inside. There is a moment of numbness before the pain but it comes, when it comes, in a rush, the blood flooding across the pale skin like the sea across a levee.

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"No," I said.

"Yesss."

She pulled my shirt-tails free from the waistband of my trousers and began to struggle with the buttons of my shirt.

"No," I said.

"You're just playing hard to get."

"No."

"I'm not doing it with you dressed like that," she said.

"Then don't."

I kissed her. Her fingertip found the first scar, the special scar, the line drawn and re-drawn through the body's curve, smoother than skin and sensitive. Its damage ached towards her touch like a root towards moisture. Her palms peeled the shirt from my chest and the lamplight glowed on a ladder of old wounds.

"I see," she said.

"Do you?"

She teased the pale cuniformal of cuts and scratches with her fingernail, then stooped to run her tongue along the longest, rawest scar, tasting the sense of it.

“How long have you been doing that?”

“Guess.”

She bent forward again to brush the special scar with her lips.

“You can’t kiss it better,” I said.

”Why not?”

“Just can’t.”

”Try me.”

“Try you?”

”Try me.”

We tried. We tried for ages, on the sofa, on the berber mat, packing ourselves into the fucking algebra, balancing terms, expanding life’s parentheses but nothing was resolved. I made her come because I felt I should. I packed myself away and left.

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I found the scalpel blade. It was hidden beneath my desk drawer, sellotaped to the wood. There was a bottle of Asda own-brand scotch in the kitchen. I put on Jim Reeves and shut the blinds. A blob of lamplight drifted up to the anaglypta ceiling like shit that floats. Best naked I thought. I unpeeled my legs from the trousers and draped my crumpled shirt on the arm of the chair. I pulled off my socks. My prick was still red and swollen from the evening’s excitement. I breathed in the air of my place through stale whisky, light and the familiar noise. The first incision of the night was a short quick slash across the instep of my right foot as I kicked it up in a figure 4 across my leg. The thick skin on my sole was slow to open but when it came it came in five perfect beads radiant against the pale skin, like stars emerging from behind the veil of sunset but almost black.