

Split Infinities

Of course, they never meant to do it. They were, after all, just ordinary men.

And ordinary men never think themselves capable of causing disaster.

It began -as you knew it would - in a pub. Not a famous pub with a history of its own, like the Curlers or the Scotia. Not even a hard pub, the kind found skulking, mean as a street-fighter, in some dark corner of the city. No, it was one of those perfectly ordinary establishments in a quiet part of Glasgow, populated only by those who have forgotten where they left their dreams, and have entered in the hope of forgetting what it is they have lost.

It wasn't much to look at inside, the decor, that strange confusion of beaten copper and the decapitations of woodland animals that is reminiscent of Scottish baronial only in the minds of foreigners. But to Douglas Archibald McGillicuddy (known as wee Dougie to his friends and *Mr* McGillicuddy to all others), this was home. He stood, with the quiet dignity of the local, a man in his middle years, his hair thinning and his waist thickening, supping a pint of Eighty Shilling. He was proud to boast that his place on the bar was worn shiny by the weight of his own elbows, and that here he could be found, any night of the week, as much a part of the scene as the sweet smell of fermentation.

The story might have ended here before it had begun, except that, at the very moment he emptied his glass, entered one James Macleod, a tall man of mild expression, who surveyed the scene with a certain curiosity.

'Dougie! Is that yourself?'

Startled, McGillicuddy looked up and caught sight of the broad figure of his friend. 'James man. Been a while.' He patted the bar proprietarily. 'Have ye time for a quick one?'

'That I do,' said James. He pulled up a stool beside Dougie and let the smaller man buy him a nip of ten year old malt. Several moments passed, while Dougie pretended not to watch the very big man sipping at the very small drink, then finally he repeated casually into the air: 'Been a while.'

'Aye,' said James. 'That it has.'

Dougie stared at the bottom of his glass. 'Been away?' 'Aye,' said James.

'Working?' asked Dougie.

'No. No. I have an aunt on Skye that needed a wee bit help.' 'Ah,' said Dougie.

He pushed his empty glass across the bar. And there the story might have ended, except that...

'You'll have another?' asked James.

Dougie glanced at his watch. It was, after all, Friday. But, Woman 's Guild night or no, there are times a man must show he is master i n his own house. 'Aye,' he said. 'Why not?'

An hour passed and then another. The plastic hands of *the/aux* Edwardian mantel clock read a quarter to ten. And by that time they had drunk a toast to friendship, to Scotland's chances in the World Cup, to each other's wives, the battle of Bannockburn, and, lastly, to Rabbie Burns because a man's a man for ah that. Dougie raised his glass. 'A toast,' he began. But then he paused. What was left?

James lifted his glass. 'To our new freedom, and to finally getting shot of the bloody English.'

Dougie stared, misty-eyed, at his friend. 'I'll drink to that.' Their glasses sang out a little note of solidarity.

There was silence for a moment, and fearing that he could not think of a better toast, Dougie said hastily, 'Ye'd think they would have known.'

'Aye.' James was gazing into the dreamy distance. 'They should have seen it coming.'

'It's been a sorry day for them since they lost us.' 'Mass unemployment'

'Rising prices'

'Unrest.'

'Riots.'

'Losing that penalty to the French.'

The two men nodded sagely together, and Dougie, feeling his chest swell with pride added, 'To think they said we couldn't live without them. And look at us now. Near full employment. Standard of living going up. Interest rates coming down. A man couldnae ask for more.' He sighed with satisfaction. 'Shows how they relied on us though. And never a word of gratitude. But we held together.'

'Aye, not in vain was our suffering,' agreed James.

Feeling another toast coming on, Dougie looked over at his friend. But the thin crease of a frown was dividing James' brow.

'Of course it's our oil.'

He added nothing more, but a dreadful silence fell. And it was not until the hands of the clock were clinging together in the frightened embrace of ten to ten, that Dougie repeated uncertainly, 'Our oil?'

James did not look at his friend, but he answered steadily. 'You'll tell me if you disagree, of course, but it's myself that's thinking that all our oil is to be found in the North.'

Dougie swallowed hard. 'I cannae deny it. But as a natural resource, it belongs to Scotland.' He spread his hands. 'As a whole.'

'And yet,' said James. 'We seem to see no benefit from it in the Highlands.'

'I cannae agree with ye there, James.' Dougie drained his glass. 'Who gets all the funding? I tell ye, the national spending deficit per capita in the Highlands far exceeds that which the man in the Lowlands can expect.'

James nodded into his glass. 'Aye, but is that not because there is greater unemployment and deprivation in the North of the country?'

Dougie frowned and played with the corner of his coaster. 'That may be so,' he conceded. 'But, who gets all the support to keep alive wee farms that wouldn't last a day in the commercial world, while the small businessman in the Lowlands is left to fend for himself.'

Before answering, James signaled the barman to refill their glasses, and waited patiently until the task was complete. 'I do not deny that the small businessman in the Lowlands struggles. But that is because he has nothing worth offering to sell.'

'Nothing worth offering!' Dougie was off his stool and on his feet. But finding himself addressing the larger man's breast pocket, he hastily retook

his seat.

James watched this performance without comment. But when Dougie once more challenged his assertion, he answered calmly. 'In the Highlands, we sell whisky and tartan and venison and tweed, all valuable and world-renowned areas of commerce. But walk along a street in Glasgow or Edinburgh and all a man can see are Estate Agents and Building Societies and companies that deal in the relations of the public. Not a decent endeavor for a human person anywhere to be found.'

Dougie slammed down his glass. 'D'ye know what the trouble is with you lot in the Highlands?'

James glanced pointedly at the barman. 'No, but I am certain you are about to tell me.'

'Aye I am.' Dougie's hand thumped against the bar, like a judge's gavel. 'The trouble with the bunch of ye is, you're all still living in the past. You've spent the last two hundred years crying into sodden oats and sheep entrails, leaving us down here, in the Lowlands, to get on with the struggle.'

It was James' turn to be angry now, and his knuckles grew visibly paler. 'We have given you history. We have given you wars and passion and tragedy. And what is it that have you given to us?'

'Only the steam train. Only tarmacadam. Only penicillin,' Dougie cried. 'What have you done? I'll tell ye. Wrapped Nostalgia up in tartan then sold her across the counter to the first tourist through the door.'

James' expression grew dark. 'At least when a person wraps themselves in the tartan of their ancestors they do a noble thing.'

Dougie spluttered on his swallow of whisky. 'People don't wrap themselves in

tartan. This is the twenty first century. They put it on the backseats of cars and over pin cushions and round poodles.'

'In the Lowlands, they do,' growled James. 'Where there is no sense of history.' 'We don't need a sense of history. Our government is looking tae the future.'

'Our government. *Our* government. You mean the government of the Lowlands. A government that doesn't understand the needs of its own people in the Highlands and islands. And what's more, doesn't want to.'

'I cannae accept that,' Dougie cried. 'Even if you disallow that this government, whom you pour such scorn upon, does not already spend a greater part of its income on supporting the people north of the Perthshire divide: even if you cannot see the benefits of the interpersonal service skills that our Lowland cities have fought so hard to promote on an international scale: Even if you sweep aside the many inventions and sheer ingenuity of the Lowland Scot that has made your lives more bearable, ye have tae admit that this government pays homage to its High l and peoples by devoting two entire channels of viewing entertainment to a language understood by less than a tenth of its population.'

Even for a man of fiery emotions, such as Douglas McGillicuddy, this was an impassioned speech, and at the end of it he was left red and panting. He waited, breathless, as James took a long sip of his whisky.

'Gaelic,' said James 'is one of the purest spoken languages there is.'

'But almost no Scots speak it. Nor would choose to, even given the option.'

The whiteness of James' knuckles grew deeper. 'When you scrape off the

veneer, most of those, who claim their ancestry here, are not Scots at all.'

There was a silence in the bar. Almost everyone was listening. But the two men did not notice. Dougie was on his feet once more and James was drumming a tattoo with his fingers against the side of his glass.

'What might ye mean by that last statement?' Dougie asked. His voice was low and dangerous.

'I mean,' answered James slowly. 'That, while we may be few, you, and those like you, are nothing but a bunch of Irishmen trying to take root in Scottish soil. A wee bitty like those pock-eyed potatoes you couldn't grow on your own land.'

The silence was audible.

'And did it ever occur to you,' hissed Dougie, 'that the reason the Highlands have never been repopulated is because the only women that'll have ye come with their own wool coats.'

'Liar!' shouted James.

'Racist!' yelled Dougie.

James got to his feet. 'If Prince Charlie could hear you.'

Dougie danced up and down on the spot. 'He can't hear me. He's dead. Gone. Buried with the potatoes. When will ye get it through your thick, Highland head that he's never coming back? Never!'

James took a step closer. 'Aye, he is never coming back because he knows who would be there to betray him again.'

'Ye'll take that back. Ye'll take that back!' Dougie yelled. 'Atler all we've done for ye. Who gave ye television?'

James bent down and spoke very softly. 'What price mass media, when you are living off the blood of your brothers?'

No-one knew who threw the first punch. Later on both sides would claim the advantage. But within seconds teeth and antlers were flying. And, afterwards little survived, except the *faux* mantel clock and it never told right again. No-one knew what ended the fight either. But it is notable that most can recall Douglas McGillicuddy 's final words as he was ejected through a near-side window. 'If ye hate the Lowlands so much, why d'ye no bloody leave then?'

And there the story might have ended, except that the next day the papers took up the tale, and soon questions were being asked in parliament and whispered on the streets. *Why d'ye no leave then?*

There is a little pub on a quiet corner of Inverness. Nothing much to look at. A little too old-fashioned to be modern, a little too worn to be antiquated. But glance across at a quiet table in the corner almost any night of the week, and you would find one James MacLeod, first prime minister of the United Assembly of the Highlands and Islands, sipping a nip of malt whisky.

He was known as a man of the people, and when David McMurtrie, a friend from the Isle of Harris arrived, he was more than willing to pull back his table and order a second glass. David shook out his coat, and taking his seat, asked, 'How are thi ngs going, now that you are a government man?'

James nodded slowly. 'Ach, well enough.'

David nodded along with him. 'I hear you 're doing a grand job.'

'Aye.' James' smile was slow. 'I think we can expect the standard of living to rise again this year.'

'Aye? Good. Good.'

And that might have been an end to it, except

'Of course, said David. 'It's our tweed,'