

7. AN ANGEL'S VEESIT

Rainy rainy rattlesteens
Dinna rain on me
Rain on Johnny Groat's hoose
Hyne ootower the sea.

Rain. It dreepit frae the slate reefs o Dessloch Place, it sweeled doon the gutters, it turned the cassies near blaik wi the doonpish garrin the snails in the gairdens draa in their twa lums, an the mavis takk shelter aneth the rubbery leaves o a rhododenron buss till it stoppit. Eneuch tae droon an ark. Aa Minnie's sma possessions hid bin flitted tae Granny Bruce's hame the nicht afore, cairtit in bi Daisy, the horsie that her faither hid gien her afore he deid. In a wye it made the flittin easier tae thole, kennin that Daisy hid flittit tae the toon wi her, tae help deliver the milk. Granny hid reassured the quinie a hunner times that eence she wis sattled in Aiberdeen, an Ma hid mair a grip on her grief an the rinnin o the ferm, she nicht ging hame fur the antrin wikkeyn. It wisna a punishment, bein sent tae bide wi her granny, na, na, it wis aa fur her ain gweed, tae gie her a gran education an tae smeeth doon her roch edges, makk mair o a leddy ooto her.

They hid gaen Minnie a wee room tae hersel abeen the dairy an cairt shed at the eyn o the street far it jined wi Fitehaa Brae. Neist tae Annie's wee room wis the laft, a glory hole o bits o cairpets an photies an bairntrock an styew. Aa the unwintit things in the hoose fand their wye tae the laft. On the neist fleer doon wis Aunt Florence's room, an on tither side o the stairs wis the music room far she tuik her wee chairges tae larn them their scales an arpeggios. Granny hid already telt Minnie that she wis tae be pit tae Aunt Florence tae learn the pianie, sharin her lessons wi her cousin Isie, ae bricht spot in the itherwise dreich horizon. Isie's fowk hid sattled inno the Glamis Hotel a while back in a lang street near the hairt o the toon on een o its main arteries. Isie hersel gaed tae fee pyin schule fur dothers o gentlefowk, an her faimly hid great hopes o her makkin a gweed match an merryin weel.

On the neuk o the landin, ower frae the granfaither clock, wis Uncle Dougal's room... bit wi him in Kuala Lumpur it wis hauf turned inno a library, far the Bruces keepit their buiks on lang raws o shelvin ben the waas. On the boddom fleer wis Aunt Jessie's room, neist tae Granny Bruce. Aunt Jessie keepit hoose tae Granny Bruce. The parlour an the kitchie war on the boddom fleer, an the dry lavvie wis oot the back at the eyn o the gairden neist tae the coal shed an the wash hoose. Granny's

hoose wis far finer than Minnie's hame on the ferm. Auld Mattha, her man, hid bin chairman tae the Widside pairish cooncil, heid o th schule boord o governors yonner, tae, fin he fermed Widdies afore his laddie Jimmy tuik it ower. His dairy at Dessloch Place retailed tae sax shops in the toon. He'd bin Preses o the dairyman's Association, a director o the Central Mart, an officer o the United Free Kirk as weel as a husband an faither, his bairns aa grown an aa either fermin or teachin, or ower the braid oceans overseein the milkin o rubber frae trees in hyne awa Ceylon or Malaya. Auld Mattha hid deed sax month afore Minnie's Da, an this bein the Sabbath, as seen as brakkfast wis ower, Granny Bruce as matriarch o the faimly wid order a gig tae takk them ower tae the Machar Kirk far her man wis beeriet, fur the Sabbath service.

As yet, Minnie hidna sterted unpackin, apairt frae her flannel goon the nicht afore. She stude at the windae o her room an glowered up Fitehaa Brae, up tae far her mither Sally hid keepit hoose tae a kinswummin, Dr Annie Ross, een o the first wummin doctors in the toon. On this verra brae, her Ma hid met her Da, at the tail eyn o the dairy cairt fin she'd brocht oot her joog fur him tae fullt. Her mither got aa her braw frocks frae the doctor, she wis a great favourite wi her kinswummin, mair o a companion nur a hoosekeeper.

Ower the road wis Addison's shoppie, a grocer's richt on the neuk opposite, wi a gas lamp oot on the street aside it, that the leerie man waukit roon an lichtit fin gloamin fell, saft an grey like a widda's veil ower her een.

Leerie leerie licht the lamps
Langlegs an crookit shanks.

The newcomer tae the toun sat at the lang keekin glaiss on the press aside her bed, ruggin the cloots ooto her ringlets, listenin tae the rain batter teetle the windae peen, takkin stock o the dreichness o the toon ootside. At hame, at Steenhillock, June wid be bringin the kintra tae early flouer, the hey parks wad be thick an sweet wi simmer girse. In the sheughs, the wild fite rose wad be bloomin, and the lea rigs wad be fillin wi buttercups an sweet pink clover; the dykes wad be brichtened by yalla broom at their sides an violets at their feet. An deep in the Fir Widdie, harebell an forget me nots wad be dauncin, far the rowan stood wi her posies o sma fite flouers.

Minnie Bruce bit her boddom lip. She widna greet. She widna greet. She wid hae tae learn tae like the toon. Granny an the aunts wid be guid tae

her, an Daisy wis here in the stable aneth, aa that wis left tae her noo, o her faither Matthew.

'Minnie, yer brakkfast's on the table, her Aunt Jessie cried.

Doon she cam in her Sabbath frock, blaik because she wis in mournin fur her Da, an her Granda, tee. Aabody roon the table wis dressed in blaik.

Heid o the table sat Granny Bruce. She wis seeventy fower year auld, wi a kind, roon face, runkled, an plain, wi gowd roon glaisses on the eyn o her snoot that gart her luik like hoolet. Her hair wis pairtit in the middle an pued back inno a bun. On her left, sat Aunt Florence. Like Aunt Jessie, Aunt Florewnce wis in her thirties, tho tae Minnie at thirteen year auld, aa three o them war as auld's the hills o Birse. Baith o the aunts wore gowd room glaisses like their mither, wi pale blue een like a mavis's eggshells, an hair the colour o dry strae.

Aunt Jessie hid laid the table afore the fire in the parlour, a braw fite lace table cloot wi polished cutlery that reflected the lowe o the fire wi a dull reid glow. The toast sat in a siller toast rack that hid curly feet. The teapot sat on a siller rack wi curly feet an aa, happit in a worsit teacosy. Minnie sat on a polished mahognay cheer an curled her taes inside her buits, an swung her feet back an fore aneth the table, duntin the table leg wi her heels like a restless shelt.

'Minnie dearie dinna dee that, yer nae on the ferm noo. Ye maun learn tae behave yersel like a young lady an nae like a dray-horse. While yer Auntie Jessie's bringin ben the parritch, we'll jist rin throw yer catechisms tae see if ye mynd them aa', quo her Granny Bruce.

Fit is the chief eyn o Man?

Man's chief eyn is tae gloriffee God an tae enjoy him foriver.

Fit micht the fifth commandment be, Minnie?

Honour thy faither an thy mither, that thy days be lang upon the lan that the Lord thy God his gien ye.

An fit micht the fourth commandment be, dearie?

Mynd tae keep the Sabbath day haly. Sax days shall ye wirk, an dee aa thy wirk, bit the seeventh day is the Sabbath o the Lord thy God. In it ye mauna dee ony wirk, nor thy son, nor thy dother, nor ... granny, fit wye did Aunt Jessie makk the parritch on the Sabbath?

Wheesht dearie, an sup yer brakkfaist or we'll be late fur the kirk, said her Granny, makkin a queer face ahin Minnie's back tae Aunt Florence.

The rain stottit aff the reef o the gig aa the wye ower tae the Machar Kirk, an near drookit the fower o them as they hashed ower its steen flags inno its open doors. Granda Bruce wis beeriet in the neuk, wi an iron railin at

his back an a buss o ivy happit the dyke aneth him. Minnie luikit ower tae the neuk, hauf expectin the auld man tae rise up ooto his clorty hame, bit he didna. It wis the first time she'd worshipped in the Machar Kirk. She'd bin beddit wi the croup fin Granda Bruce deed, sae hidna jyned the lave at his service here. Her een opened wider than twa ashets as she tuik her seat at the Bruce pew. It wis naethin like the Steenhillock pairish kirk, naethin like. Aunt Florence bent ower tae fuser in her neice's lug.

'The first kirk here wis biggit tae convert the Picts. This kirk yer sittin in's near echt hunner year auld, Minnie. Tak a teet at the reef abeen ye.'

Minnie's een traivelled up an ower the shields o popes an bishops, kings an nobles frae aa the warld's airts.

'Far's the precentor, auntie?'

'They dinna need een here, they've haen an organ these past thirty year. The music comes ooto aa thon pipes.'

Tae the left o their pew, wis the steen statue o a bishop, lyin on his back, an abeen thon, a muckle stained glaiss windae wi an angel on't.

'Fas the angel, aunt ?' Minnie speired.

St Matthew, Minnie, the same name as yer da an yer granda an yer brither.

An fit story is the picture tellin, aunt?

The parable o the talents, an the three servants, Minnie.

Sae Minnie learned St Matthew's story, o foo the maister traivelled tae a far kintra an left ahin three servents....jist like Da hid left hersel an her ma an Matty ahin. An aa the servants hid talents, an war telt tae makk the maist o them. Bit ae servant beeriet his talent in the grun, an dinna makk eese o't ava, an yon wis a cruel waste an a sin, fur ye sud ay makk the maist o fitiver gift God gies ye, her Aunty said.

Minnie didna think tae speir fit a talent nicht, bit it soundit important fitiver it wis. The meenister's text wis John ch 1 verse 5:

*an the licht shineth in the derk
an the derk couldna comprehen it ava*

An yon wis fairly richt, fur maist o the sermon gaed clean ower her heid, bit the Aunts an her Granny likit it, because it wis lang an dreich an dowie an sae it maun hae dane them gweed, fur faiver heard o mixture that didna

taste soor? Fur maist o the service the quine sat reeted tae the pew, wytin tae see fit happened fin the music cam ooto the lang steel pipes abeen the organ, fair trickit at the wye the hymns gaed richt tae the rafters garrin the hale kirk birr wi soon. At least the rain wis aff, fur at the eyn o the service, the fower o them wauked ooto the hauf licht o the Machar Kirk tae a sinsheeny day, and turned richt afore the gate, tae pye their respecks tae Granda. Granny Bruce tuik oot a hanky an dabbit her een, an the Aunts patted her shooders.

Matty's quine Minnie's cam tae bide wi's, Granny telt the heidsteen. An we'll dee fit we can tae makk sure she turns oot like her Da wid hae wintit.'

Fin they won hame again, denner wis cauld meat an breid n' butter, syne Minnie wis left tae her ain devices while Granny crooshied a cheerback, Aunt Jessie pared tatties in the kitchie, and Aunt Florence timmered oot a wee gavotte on the pianie. At hame, she'd hae bin oot gaitherin the hens' eggs, or chasin the cock roon the midden. Here, there wis naethin tae dee an aa the time in the warld tae dee it. Efter a while she speired at Granny if she could gyang neist door tae the stable tae sit wi Daisy a whyle. She wisna alloued tae ride her, nae in the toon, because neither Daisy nor Minnie war eesed tae the toon an its wyes, an bikes an shelts an even the antrin car cam fleein doon Fitehaa Brae. Forbye, baith Daisy an Minnie war supposed tae be grown up noo.

Minnie'd bin pit tae the toon tae ging tae Rosemill Schule efter the simmer, an Daisy's daft days o rinnin lowse throw the parks war by wi annaa. She wis tae earn her keep an staun atween the shafts o the twa wheeled milk float, an trot roon the streets nearhaun the dairy. Derkie wis the aulder horse, an he could pull the fower wheeler, fur the Bruces hid sax dairy shops in the toon, an the heavy cans frae Widside, Kilbog an Steenhillock maun be ferried roon bi calm, steady beasts that didna spook an shy awa frae the toon's steer.

Minnie gaed intae Daisy's staa fur a news. Daisy hid een like twa blaik meens in puils o cream. She blinkit at her mistress frae aneth her lang, fair lashes. Minnie hid brocht a sup sugar, an a carrot oot frae the hoose neist door, an held them oot for Daisy tae ett. While the muckle chestnut jaws o the shelt chawed frae side tae side, Minnie began tae straik Daisy's lang, braid snoot, an tae fuser inno the funnel o her hairy lug.

'I dinna like the toon, Daisy,' she fusered. 'Bit it's a secret, an ye maunna tell naebody. Granny an Aunt Florence an Aunt Jessie are affa kind, bit I miss the Fir Widdie already, tho we've jist bin here a wee whylie. I miss

the coos, an I miss the byre, an I miss Benjy, even tho Ma says he's nae my dug at aa, he's Matty's. He likes me better than he likes Matty, Daisy. maybe that's fit wye I've tae bide in the toon. An I ken ye dinna like it either, bit we'll jist hae tae thole it, you an me. Because I've tae learn tae behave like a leddy an nae like a dray-horse, an ye maun forget the park at the back o the Leddrach dam, an learn tae pu the cairt fin Alec tells ye.'

The shelt's lugs cockit forrit, takkin aa this in, then she nichered softly, garrin her muckle nostrils shudder, an hung doon her heid fur Minnie tae scrat her neck. An sae began Minnie Bruce's first simmer in the toon.

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Fin a twa, three wikks war by, life hid begun tae saddle inno a kinno uneasy rhythm. At sax o clock ilkie mornin, the cairts wid arrive frae Widside, Tilbog an Steenhillock, loadit wi full milk cans, an Minnie wid rin tae her windae tae watch as Alec an Ned, the Mathieson brithers loadit up Derkie an Daisy's cairts fur delivery roon the toon. The cans they cairriet hid taps on them, an they likewise cairriet cream an butter an eggs. Alec an Ned hid bin up sin the back o five giein their horse a brush doon an feedin them their brakkfaist o hey an oats. Aince the shelties trotted awa, they widna be back till hauf past nine, an efter thon the twa brithers wad hae tae clean the cans and coont the siller an tcyauve awa at a thoosan ither jobs that needin daein.

Aften, fowk at the big hooses wadna lat the milkmen chap at the front door, they'd tae gyang roon bi the tradesman's entrance at the side o the hoose, far a skiffie wid haud oot her joog. Bit maistly, fowk kent that the milk hid arrived ootbye, fin Derkie or Daisy strukk their iron sheen against the cassies a twa three times, fur the weemin aroon hid them clean connached an pettit. It wisna unusual fur fowk tae gie the horses a heerie o breid or a veggie tae chaw an their dung wis aywise welcome bi fowk wi gairdens fur bringin on roses or rhubarb.

Meanwhile, Granny Bruce an the Aunts hid knuckled doon tae the job o ceevalisin Minnie. Aunt Jessie tuik the lassie ben tae the kitchie in the mornin an showed her foo tae clean the cutlery, braise the ornaments, an polish the windaes wi vinegar till they shone. A washer wife wauked ower frae the tenements three streets awa, an cairtit awa the fool washin, an brocht it back bleached an dry an ironed twice a wikk, sae there wis nae heavy washin tae dae like Meg Ramsay an Minnie's mither trauchled wi at Steenhillock. Bit then, there wis nae fine bleachin green in the nippit excuse fur a gairden her Granny ained, an nae heich brae far the roch stoot wins cud get a gweed skelp at a towe fu o dryin sheets an wallop them back an fore in the kintra air.

Efter denner, Aunt Florence tuik ower the darg o educatin Minnie. First aff, they sat doon in the room that hid aince bin Uncle Dougal's, full o ivory jumbos, braisse monkeys, an sic like. Fin it rained in the toun, as aften as no it did, the quine wid taen a tig o gaun inno this room, tae plsay wi the braisse monkeys an the ivory jumbos. There war three braisse monkeys, aa stukken thegither. Ane hid its hauns clapped ower its lugs in an expression o ootrage aboot something that maun hae misfittit it. It wis caad 'Hear-nae-evil'. The middle monkeys hauns war ower its moo, an it wis caad 'Spikk-nae -evil'. The last ane's hauns war clapped ower its een, an it wis caad 'See-nae-evil', an yon wis the wye that Minnie kent that the monkeys war furreign, fur God saw aathing, thon hid bin dinned intae her since she first drew braith, an ye sudna be daein evil at aa, fur God watched aathing aa the time, there wis nae gettin awa frae thon.

In Uncle Dougal's room, Aunt Florence wad takk doon a buik frae the dizzens that lined the waas, an makk Minnie read frae it, Scott, an Dickens, an Shakespeare an the like, till the preint daunced afore her een an her heid wis reelin wi princes an paupers an reid-wud roarin Heilanmen. Syne they wad flit tae the music room, the cauldest room in the hoose, an fur twa oors her back grew sair as she sat on the bowdie leggit pianie steel timmerin up the notes. She'd a lot o grun tae makk up, the twa Aunts telt her afore she'd be onything like as gweed as Isie her cousin, faith she'd hae tae wirk hard tae be fit tae gyang tae a schule in the toon wi ither quines her age.

They ay suppit tea aroon five. Whyles, in the simmer nichts, the Bruces hired Alec an Ned an the horses oot tae help wi a flittin, or ither cairtin jobs, afore stablin them fur the nicht. Gin Minnie'd deen weel at her lessons, she got tae gyang wi them, tae sit on Daisy's back, as lang as she mindit tae sit sidesaddle an nae stridelegged like a loon, an dinna makk Daisy canter or ony daft capers. Whiles o an evenin Isie cam roon fur a pianie lesson, bit Minnie wis still ower roch in her spikk fur Isie tae be seen aboot the toun wi her. Isie likit weel eneuch tae use braid Scots inbye the hoose, bit her new fand friens wad hae leuch at her if she'd spukken afore them as she spakk fin she wis wi Minnie. As yet Minnie didna ken foo tae cheenge the wye she spakk, nur did she hae till yet, fur aabody aroon her spakk the same barr mebbe Isie. Even Matty, fa'd bin growin gey gentrified fin he gaed tae the college in toun, hid slippit back tae the auld spikk noo that his dreams war forgotten an his buiks an jotters laid by.

The last wikk in June wis as bonnie a sunny evenin as onybody could wint, nae a cloud in the lift an the young leaves fullin the trees. A fairly war meevin frae Green Street tae Dunstane Drive, an baith the cairts hid bin hired tae help wi the flit. Alec Mathieson liftit Minnie up on Daisy's back wi a tyauve.

'Lordsake fit a wecht, ye maun hae steens in yer sheen,' he leuch, fur Minnie wis bloomin, shod in thick leather button-up buits wi heavy skirts an petticoats for aa that the weather wis warm. Aff they set on the short haul up Fitehaa Brae. A car wis comin doon the wye, at a fair lick fur a charabang, fin the driver's brakes failed. There wis the heich skreich o the wheels as they skyted across the road, an Daisy reared, haivin Minnie affo his back. Alec Mathieson focht wi the reyns, bit the car careered inno the richt flank o the horse, an broke her hin leg wi ae skelp. Daisy gaed doon wi a dunt, an nichered an whinneyied, the broken been cockin clean throw the skin, the reyns twisted roon her neck. The cairt wis cowped in a gairden hedge, an Minnie lay quate on her side, face doon in the glaury road, wi a thin wee treelip o reid rinnin oot frae the crook o her moo.

Ned ran back tae the stable fur Alec's gun, that he whyles shot pheasant wi in Kilrogie wids, on his ae day aff a wikk fin he traivelled hame tae the Troot Wallie cottar hoose on Steeny's parks. A kirm o fowk hid witnessed the accident, an war steerin aboot the cairt an the flailin horse like flees. Some weemin war greetin inno their peenies. A wee fite dug wis bowfin an bowfin an rinnin up an doon in excitement. A sweep wi a tarry face set doon his hurly an brushes tae see fit the ootcam wid be.

'Its the Bruce's cairt,' a wummin was sayin, 'an I think it's the Bruce's grandother. I think thon skelp maun hae killt her.'

'Staun back. Bide back,' Ned Mathieson warned them. 'I canna leave the lassie's shelt like thon.'

He tuik careful aim an fired atween Daisy's een. The horse gied limp like a sack o burst grain. The knacker wad takk her an cut her up fur dog meat. Syne Alec ran doon the brae wi Minnie in his airms an up the three steps tae the Bruce's door like greased lichtenin, liftin the braise knocker an chappin sae hard he near ruggit it affo its hinges. Aunt Jessie opened the door, her face drainin o colour, nae a pick o colour in her chikks ava fin she saw her neice like thon, an led Alec up tae the quine's room, tae the left o the laft, abeen the dairy stable.

Cannily, the young chiel laid her doon. Bluid wis treetlin doon frae ae lug, an fin Jessie liftit a hank o blaik hair, the quinie's heid wis bruised an mattit wi bluid. Minnie's een flichtered open a wee, an o a suddenty, wi nae warnin ava, she cowked aa doon the side o the bonnie fite linen sheets.

'The room's gaun roon Aunt Jesssie' quo she, 'the room's gaun roon, and yer face is aa shoogly, I canna makk it oot.'

Efter yon, her heid fell back on the bowster an her een shut.

Alec Mathieson wis sent fir the doctor fa cam richt aff, a shilpit auld man wi a gammie fit frae the heid o Fiteha Brae. The doctor socht room tae examine her, lows in the collar aroon her neck as he did it.

'Wi a knell yon like, an the bluidin, I'd say she's fractured her skull,' he telt Granny Bruce, snippin the catch on his doctor's bag thegither wi a snap. 'Leave her fur twa days tae rest. Gie her a chaunce tae cam roon hersel. If she's nae ony better efter thon'...the doctor shuik his heid.

Aunt Florence, Aunt Jessie, an Granny tuik it in turns tae sit wi her. In fit queer kintra she wis durin thon time naebody iver kent, bit fur certain it wisna ony wye near Dessloch Place or even Steenhillock Ferm. On the secunt nicht fin the paraffin lamp wis flichterin low an the shaddas war heich on the waa o her wee attic room, Minnie's een blinkit open a thochtie. Aunt Florence wis sittin in a cheer aside the bed, clean foonert, jist stertin tae nod inno sleep, an open buik on her lap, slidin doon her skirt inno the faulds o her frock. Minnie Bruce hid a veesitor.

He stood at the eyn o her bed, her faither, fur she kent richt aff it wis him, an yet it wisna him as she'd iver kent him afore, fur he wis cled in licht frae heid tae foun, an smilin, raxxin his airms oot tae her, an tall, he wis, sae heich he fullt the room. An if luv cud staun nyakkit an bare o aa bit licht, it fullt thon room that nicht, an enfauldit an bore her up, an smeethed the hair that stukk tae her broo wi swyte, an happt her roon an roon frae tap tae tail, fur ilkie pikk o her body wis precious tae him, like his ainsel.

'Fareiver ye gyang, I shall gyang,' quo the chiel in the licht

Fariver ye bide, I shall bide

Thy fowk shall be my fowk

An my God, yours.'

At her faither's back wis a laidder, wis thon nae the queerest thing? A laidder o pure licht, that raxxed frae the fit o her bed up an oot throw the reef o the hoose, throw the tap o the sleepin toun, heich, heich, till it reached the starnies that glented hyne awa at the back o the meen. She fell intae a deep sleep efter yon, an fin it wis by, she wis better. There wis nae mair murnin fur the parks o Steenhillock. The lowe in the hairth o yon place hid bin her faither's luv, an he'd cam back himsel frae the grave tae

pledge that she'd ay hae thon, fariver she gaed, ay, in the dreichest
cauldest holes o fate itsel.

Bit she niver telt Aunt Jessie, Aunt Florence nur Granny fa stood at the fit
o her bed yon nicht, nor yet fit guise he tuik, fur it lay ower deep fur
kennin in the mortal wye. She vowed that fin she wis weel eneuch, she
wid makk gweed eese o her talents, takkin tent o the teachin o the saint fa
shone frae the waa in the Machar Kirk, far the glorious sun poored
through the great stained windae, her faither's namesake in the Warld
abeen the warld. Bit bi bit Matthew Bruce hid fashioned a suit o armour
fur Minnie that wis her Faith, an noo wis fairly the time tae pit it on. An
sae hard an fierce an bricht wis yon armour, foo strang it gart her feel, fur
naethin ava cud iver pierce thon certainties. Foo fine tae hae a road
mapped oot afore ye, a Pilgrim wi a sword fur ilkie dragon!