

5. HOGMANAY

It wis the eve o Hogmanay. It wis Winter an it wis the Sabbath, an Minnie Bruce hid chilblains on her feet, an chapped fingers. Forbye, it wis aa her ain wyte. Fin the first storms blew in ower the Hill o Leddrach, she hidna packit her schule buits wi hey tae line an warm them. Mairower, she hidna telt her ma that her buits war leakin, because she likit her buits an wis feart that her ma wid gar her weir a auld pair till the weather cleared eneuch fur the Bruce's tae win tae the soutar ower at Dunracht tae get her new anes. She hid tried tae warm her chilblains on the steen pig in her bed at nicht, bit the heat gart them dirl an itch aa the mair.

In coorse weather like this, the feed men cleared the road sae the milk cairt cud fecht its wye throw the drifts an makk the skyty journey echt mile inno the toon tae her Granda's dairy. Except it wisna Granda's dairy onymair, it wis Granny's, because Granda Bruce hid deid a pucklie months ago an hid flitted ooto his hoose in Dessloch Place tae a lair in the neuk o the Machar Kirk. Minnie's fowk had bin ower taen up reddin up her granfaither's affairs tae worry their heids wi the sma maitter o buits. It wis ower late noo tae tell her Ma that her buits war leakin, sna hid bin dingin doon in blin drift fur days. It wid takk oors tae fecht throw the fite sottar tae the soutar's. Ma wid gie her short shift onywyte, it wis aa her ain pride that caused the chilblains, she kent that.

The chappit hauns war doon tae pride anna. Twice a day, mornin an nicht, Minnie wis auld eneuch noo at twal year auld tae help wi the milkin ower in the dairy...thirty reid Ayreshire coos in the herd and her favourite Jersey coo, Patty. Patty wis the colour o meltin toffee. It Patty's thick creamy milk that the Bruce's used fur thirsels. The Ayreshire milk tho, wis guid eneuch fur the toonsers fa widna ken ony better. Afore a coo wis milkit, ye hid tae wash its teets wi warm watter, tae dicht awa ony skirps o sharn or fool strae...fur the beasts war keepit in the byre aa winter, an muckit oot bi the bailie as pairt o his darg...bit likewise, the warm watter wis tae gar the coo think its calflie wis sooklin it wi its sappy hett moo, sae the coo wid lat doon its milk. Minnie's hauns war steepit in the watter sax times, mornin an nicht, fur she hid chairge o six milkin coos...a lang business haun milkin. It cud takk twinty meenits tae strip a coo o milk, tho they kent Minnie an trusted her, sae it wis quicker wi her. Nor wis thon the eyn o't. The milk hid tae be be stored in pails an cans an basins in the milkhoose, afore Minnie warssled her wye throw the sna back tae the fermhoose...usually withoot pitten on her mochles on her hauns..tae colleck her slate an piece an chakk gin it wis a wikkday, fur the sledge hurl ower the parks tae the schule at Leddrach.

At Kilrogie schule the bairns hid bin makkin slidies o sliddery ice, an biggin snawmannies an haein snabaa fechts amangat thirsels fin the schule wisna closed bi the weather. Tho Minnie wore her mochles tae the schule, the worsit wis sune weety an stervin wi the snaa, an bi the time she cam hame throw the parks, the wivven fingers o them war pirled wi ice, an the hauns inside them war chappit an hackit an stounin wi sairs an ragnails.

The day, tho, she widna be alloued tae plyter aboot in the snaa. It wis the Sabbath, an Minnie's fowk war riggin fur the fower mile haik tae the kirk. Nae maitter foo coorse the weather they maun makk the journey, fur her faither, Matthew, wis precentor, an the fowk culdna sing a note wioot him. Neist tae the meenister an the beadle Minnie's Da wis the maist important body there. Yestreen, he'd pued Minnie's sledge tae the smiddy ahin Prince, the horse, sae the smith could fit the muckle shelt wi iron sheen, an sherpen them wi spikes haimmered inno ilkie hole tae grip the ice an save the breet frae skytin. Minnie's da ained five horse, aa wi their ain wyes an naturs, aa wi their ain histories...Prince, Tibby, Fauldie, Jimmy, Nancy, an her ain horse, Daisy. Da hid gien her Daisy on her saxth birthday, they hid grown thegither. Fin Daisy'd bin aa legs an lowp, sae hid Minnie. She lued Daisy near as muchas she lued her Da, faith, she'd hae bin hard caad tae chuse atween them if push cam tae shove,

Minnie didna care muckle fur the smith. Fin he booed ower Prince's hoof she hatit tae watch him chappin in the nails, tho she kent it didna hurt. The smith's face lichtit up wi the fire fin he blew the flames inno a roarin lowe wi the bellas. His physog wis lined an swyty an blaik wi seet an styew, like the Deil micht luik, if iver the Deil steppit ooto the pages o the Haly Buik.

This mornin her bedroom windae up in the attic wis glittery an fite wi frost. Minnie hatit risin on frosty mornins, pittin her hett taes frae aneth the cosie sheets ontae the steen caul linoleum, ruggin on her claes tae stop her teeth frae chitterin, gettin eesed again tae the scrat o the roch knittit knickers that ma hid wuvven fur her ooto a hank o grey oo, seein her breath hing afore her in fite clouds. On sic a day her snoot cairriet a permanent dreep an her lugs war like twa pink shells that hid bin nippit bi a labster. She blew hard on the widnae, bit thon jist saftered the frost inside them the smaaest thochtie. Faith, there wis even icicles hingin frae the windae-frames, wee eens, the size o bitticks o brukken spunks. She tuik her hard wee nails an rugged them doon the ice. Thon gart it shift, eneuch tae see oot ower the parks. Winter hid tichtened his grip throw the nicht. He wis aawye, a king in his kingdom.

Nae a breath o win wis steerin ootbye. The ruts o the cattle coort war shmoodery wi skiffins o sna, the dry girse, the colour o torn broon paper, powked through the sna like horse hair through the holes in an auld burst leather cheer. Rose hips at the fit o the kailyaird war reid as the robin's breistie, an ower the washin green, the snaa hid laid a saft fite bowster, that wis criss-crossed bi the merks o tackety buits, an the wee pronged tridents o birdies' feet. Ower bi the gean in a neuk o the girse wis the preints o Benjy's paws, an the yalla cercle roon the claes pole far he'd peed fin he'd left the hoose this mornin wi Minnie's Da, tae check on the horse in the stable.

Ilkie biggin an steadin fur miles wis thackit wi snaa, an the tail o ilkie slate reef hid a fringe o icicles, dreepin. The yalla sun gart the hyne-aff Leddrach dam shine like mither o pearl, far the fite swans chittered atween the floes o ice. The hairt o the grun wis like iron. In the Spring, the grun clung tae yer fit fin ye trod ower it. In Winter, it threw ye aff. Bit Winter or nae, the Sabbath wis the Sabbath, an doonstairs, her ma wis cryin on her.

'Minnie, yer parritch is oot. Ye'd better be up an riggit, we'll be leavin early the day tae be sure tae win throw the snaa in time fur the kirk!'

Doon the stairs she ran, tae the warmth o the kitchie. Meg Ramsay wis ower at the sink parin tatties fur dennertime soup. Da wis feedin the gowd chyne o his hunter watch throw the eelits o his westcoat. His buits war shinin like sharn, ye cud see yer face in the them, the sapples o soap war still weet aneth his lugs, far he'd razored awa his stibble, an his mowser wis washed an caimbed as gran as a provost's. Her ma wis preenin a wide, feathery hat ontae her thick blaik hair. Sally Bruce hid a tweed cape buttoned roon her neck, an a thick worsit scarf wi matchin mochles. She wis a bonnie wummin, the mistress o Steenhillock, stoot kyne, bit cairriet it weel. Hingin doon frae her collar wis a jabot o fite lace, preened bi a mauve Cairngorm she'd gotten frae her fowk at Migvree fin she'd left her hame tae merry an bide wi Steenhillock. She wis coontin the cheenge frae her purse, tae makk siccar she'd mair nur eneuch tae pit in the plate the elder wid haund roon inbye the kirk.

Matty, Minnie's brither, wis riggit in lang hose tucked in aneth his knee-length breeks, an a thick tweed cap ruggit doon ower his lugs. His galluses wadna bide buttoned, an Matty's mither wis ficherin wi them.

'Sup yer parritch, Minnie, yer ay ahin like the coo's ae tail,' her mither raged. Bit her Da winked at her frae ahin her Ma's back, an wyted wi the quinie while she teemed her platie, an helpit her up inno the governess car fin they won ootside. Tibby wis hitched tae the black, springy car,

stampin an snocherin an tossin her lang blaik mane. Minnie's Da gaed roon tae hae a wurd wi her.

'Whoa lass, bonnie lass, wheeshtie wheeshtie noo,' he said, smeethin doon Tib's flarin nostrils. 'Ye'll get a feed o oats fin the kirk's scaled, an a fine rub doon in the stable. A bittie less temper an a bittie mair peace.'

'God-sakes,' mummlit Minnie's ma tae her twa half-grown bairns, 'Yer Da should hae merriet a shelt. He's half-shelt as it is. I sweir he spenns mair time in the stable than he dis in the hoose. He's mair concerned aboot Tib bein cauld than us. An it's dashed weel stervin in this car, sae it is!'

Bit noo Tib wis sattled in harness, an doon the road they gaed past the peat shed an the byre, birrin on past the stable, the chaumer, the neep shed, an Jock Dow's chaumer, on the wye tae the kirk, the wheels o the governess car leavin sheeny tracks o ice on the skyty brae.

The wids that cercled her faither's parks war like burgandy, winy-broon an bare, in the deid-thraa o Winter. A robin wheeplit oot tae them frae the tap o a ruk. The brummil buss at the road eyn wis like barbit-weer, the deid brummils war wee hard pirls o blaik, like rabbit's drappins. As they trotted atween the drifts o icy snaa, a craa on a gean branch abeen them opened an shut its dowp feathers like a leddy clickin her fan, an craiked efter them hairse wi cauld. The sheughs bi the road war rinnin fu o blaik bree.

Minnie teetit at the burn ower the side o the governess car, watchin a branch trail its fingers inno the watter. Lang patterns o lirks an swirls o blaik an fite ran far the sun catched the wattery treelips o sna bree, garrin them shine in the yalla, blearie sun. There wid be nae skatin at the Leddrach dam this year ooto respekt fur the Troot Wallie cottars, fa's dother Jessie hid drooned hersel there last Yule, raither than hae the bairn she wis cairryin. Fa the faither wis, anely himsel an Jessie kent, fur she tuik their secrets wi her tae the grave.

'Watter christened her, an watter kistit her,' Minnie's Ma hid said.

'Fur the lips o a fremmit wummin drap as hinney frae the caimb, an her moo is smeether than ile...bit her eyn is wersh as wirmwid, sherp as a twa-edged sword. Her feet gyang doon tae Daith, her steps takk haud o Hell' Minnie's da hid said, quotin frae Proverbs, fur he hid taen it as a personal affront tae himsel an his poseetion as an office bearer in the kirk that ain o his maids hid gotten hersel bairned on his ferm, like as no wi ane o his feed men. Tho Jessie Mathieson hid brukken the commandments, as weak as Eve afore her, Steenhillock ooto thocht fur

her faither Dod, an scunner o the Dam itsel, hid banned Minnie fae settin fit within a hunner yairds o't.

The governess car wis doon on the main road noo, bit the main road wis a thin cleared path atween waas o glimmerin snaa. Tibby sherpened hooves tho, held firm on the skyty ice. The snaa hid stoppit, the kirk wis reached. The Bruce faimily made ready tae step doon ooto the car an takk the wee pathie atween the heidsteens tae the kirk door, far the beadle wis ringin the summons tae prayer frae the muckle moo o the Steenhillock Pairish kirk bell. The smaaest steen in the kirkyaird wis vrocht in the shape o a hairt, an chiselled on't wis the bare twa wirds 'Wee Jaikie', a cottar's bairn fa hid deed in last year's Winter storms o pneumonia. Minnie chittered, tho her claes war warm. Her faimly hid gaen tae the funeral, fur the cottar faimly war kirk bodies, bit the gravedigger'd opened the wrang lair, an the grun bein hard it tuik gey near an oor tae full it in again an open the richt een. Minnie kent maist o the names on the steens, fur fowk didna flit verra far langsyne fin they merriet, nae like her ma, fa belanged tae Migvree awa at the back o Beyont.

Tae Minnie's faither, Hogmanay meant little. Bit the quine kent fine that nae suner wad they win hame frae the kirk an supp their denner, than her mither wad clean the hoose frae tap tae boddom, Sabbath or nae, in honour o the New Year comin in an the Auld gaun oot. At Migvree, she telt them, they'd licht fires fur the Daith o the Auld Year, an first fit aa their friens fur a wikk an mair. Her man, Steenhillock, widna entertain ony o yon Heilan kinno notions, they'd the whiff o the Heathen aboot them, he said. Fur aa that, he wad poor his neebors oot a seasonal dram fin they cried inbye the ferm ower the neist fyew days, nae eneuch tae senn them aff teeterlogic like some did, tho. Their beasts an their weeminfowk wadna thank ye fur sennin them hame blin fu. He hid seen ower mony byres fo o hungry beasts roarin in the staas wytin fur their maisters tae cooer a New Year debauch an wis far ower ceevilised tae add a sup fusky tae the horse troch, like some fermers did, as tho the horse wid thank ye fur't!

The kirk wis near full fin they won tilt. Like the beasts in the byre, aa kent their ain staas. Minnie's faither drew oot the tunin fork frae its boxie, and gaed forrit tae staun aneth the pupit. The beadle, Gordon Watson, hirplit up the wee steep stairs wi the great blaik Buik wi its gowd edged leaves, an opened it up far the meenister'd merked the place wi a lang reid ribbon. Syne he hirplit back doon again tae repeat the trip, this time wi a glaiss joog o watter an a tummler in his rheumaticky hauns fur fear the Reverend John Geddes needit something tae clear his throat.

'I wish Mattha Bruce widna pitch his tunes sae low,' Minnie heard Mrs Baxter, frae Lower Kilrogie girn tae her man. 'An button yer spayver, Geordie, yer a damt affront comin inno the kirk wi yer shoppie door open.'

'Haud yer wheesht, wummin,' her man jibbit back. 'A deid bird winna drap ooto its nest. Bit I'll faisten it tae please ye. It's nae as if I'd deen't on purpose!'

Minnie keekit up at her mither tae see foo she wis takkin this excheege. Sally Bruce's expression niver lat dab. Da widna hae thocht it wis funny, Minnie jeloused, piously.

A smaa voice wis nae eese ava fur a precentor. Matthew Bruce's voice fullid the kirk, frae the baptismal font tae the lamplichts in the upstairs pews, the sort o voice that gaed roon yer hairt like a hairy wirm, sonorous, an rich, an roon. He didna ken mony tunes, bit then neither did the congregation...French, Kilmarnock, or the Auld Hunner war the favourites, mebbe a dizzen tunes at maist. The pye wis sma, bit as her da remairked, it wis 'aa the easier tae cairry hame.'

There wis a reeshle o hymn buiks, the whiff o peppermints pitten inno moos tae be sookit, a twa three hoasts an blawn snoots, an the Rev John Geddes wheechid throw the kirk in his blaik suit an his fite dickie collar, wi his blaik goon ower it aa like a hoodie craa. It bein near eneuch Hogmanay he hid fand a suitable text, frae Peter Chapter 5, verse echt.

Be sober, takk tent, because yer enemy the Divil as a roarin lion walketh aboot sikkin fa he nicht devour .

Sittin atween Matty an her Ma, Minnie turnt feart fur her mither, Sally. Aften, afore Steenhillock's wife turned in fur the nicht, she wid poor hersel a skirp o fusky frae the bottle wi the Fite Horsie on the front o't, a trick she'd learned at Migvree, far fusky seemed tae be the cure fur aathing. Her Da anely drank strang liquor at communion, or mebbe ae wee dram at a waddin or funeral, jist tae be sociable like. Jock Dow, the grieve at Steenhillock, wid be teeterlogic at the bells, ay, an nae jist Hogmanay, either. Minnie myndit fin she an Isie hid heard Jock Dow roarin ooto him fin he'd pitten a young feed loon throw the mystery o the Horseman's Wird, likely that wid be the Divil tryin tae chaw him, the nesty, drunken, grissly breet that he wis. Even the Divil tho widna devour Jock Dow, unless the Divil wis byordnar hungry.

It wis a lang service, an a langer sermon, an efter the elders hid taen the wee velvet baggies o siller forrit tae be blessed, an the congregation hid bin blessed, cam the anely bit Minnie really likit in the kirk, fan the Rev

John Geddes raxxed oot his blaik airms, an Da lead the singin in the hinmaist blessin:

The Lord bless ye an keep ye,
The Lord makk his face tae shine upon ye
An be gracious untae ye
The Lord lift up his Coontenance upon ye
An gie ye peace.

There wis something byordnar sweet ayont aa wirds, in thon blessin,. Whether it wis the tune she likit, or jist cause it wis the eyn o the service, she cudna be sure, bit she likit it byordnar weel. Noo, tho, the elders war filin oot an the pews war scalin. Oot she gaed tae the moo o the kirk, far her mither an faither war newsin in the mids o twa separate boorachies o fowk. Bi bitter experience, she kent they'd be there fur a whylie. Minnie wyded throw the snaa atween twa graves, makkin fur a flat steen tae doup doon on.

O a suddenty, her lug wis stung bi the fing o a snaabaa crackin aff the side o her heid. Her lug felt as if it wis on fire, it wis stoonin, dirlin, swallin. She furred roon, een bleezin, an anither snaabaa hit her full on the face this time, splittin her boddom lip. Nae ordnar snaabaa wad hae daen thon...luikin doon, she could see a steen in the mids o the snaabaa that struck her last. Then, she heard a stooshie get up, a fecht atween twa loons....Alec Mathieson was haudin her brither Matty doon in the sna, rubbin his snoot in it, an Matty wis skirlin ooto him like a stuck pig. Alec Mathieson wis five year aulder than Minnie, ane o the Troot Wallie cottars, ane o her granmither's dairymen in the toun, hame fur the Sabbath day sae his mither micht wash his sarks.

Her faither strode ower an yarked Alec affa Matty's back in a towerin rage, winnerin fit hid taen his bailie's loon tae dae sic a thing tae Matty. 'He's jist fowerteen, min, ye'll kill him. Fit's aa the stramash about onyweye?'

The beadle, Gordon Watson, hid seen Matty pittin the steens in the snaabaas an peltin his sister Minnie wi them, an tuik great delicht in tellin the precentor.

'Is this richt, Alec?' Matthew Bruce speired the young dairyman.
Alec Mathieson noddit. Steenhillock turned tae matty wi a face o thunner.
'We dinna wash wir fool linen in public. Get in the car noo, Matty. You tee, Minnie, yer lug 'n yer moo'll need some sma attention.'

The faimly drave hame in silence, ahin the braid blaik doup o Tibby. Fin the shelt drew up in the ferm coort, Matthew Bruce telt his loon tae ging

intae the stable afore him. Minnie kent it widna be jist tae help rub Tibby doon an dry her oot, or gie her her feed. Faither wis lowsin his belt afore the loon won ower the stable door. The door swung tee, there wis a meenit's wheesht, an then the skelp o leather on bare flesh, nae eence, bit mony times, an the yelp o pain frae Matty as the belt wis yarkit doon on his bared erse.

Minnie's Da cam ooto the stable haulin Matty bi the lug, an flang him throw the fermhoose gairden gate like a bun shaif.

'Did ye need tae be sae hard, Mattha?' speired his wife.

'He that spareth the rod, hateth the son. Proverbs, twintythre,' cam the repon. 'Forbye, wummin, hae ye seen the sottar he's made o the lassie's face?'

Matty wis pit tae the stable tae meat the horse wi the grieve efter his faither cweeled doon, an efter that tae muck oot the byre wi the orraloon, fur it wis Sabbath an the cottars' day aff. In the ordnar wye, Matty wid hae bin upstairs, learnin the lessons fur hame that he'd gotten frae Strathbogie College in the toon. Bit the day, if he chose tae behave a beast, he cud bide wi them, his faither said.

Denner hid bin an unca strained affair. Sally Bruce thocht her man thocht made far ower muckle o Minnie. Mebbe Matty hid bin some coorse, bit it wis ill tae thole seein Steenhillock pet her the wye he did, as if the cauld win shouldna blaw on her. Minnie's Ma an Da hidna spukken twa wirds tae ain anither, except fur the grace:

Some hae meat an canna eat
Some wad eat, bit wint it,
Bit we hae meat an we can eat
An sae the Lord be thankit.

The broth wis cauld, the pudden wis brunt, Matty'd bin thrashed an Minnie's moo wis split an her lug wis twice its size. Apairt frae thon, aathin wis fine. Matthew Bruce teemed his pudden plate, banged it doon on the table an gaed upstairs tae cheenge ooto his Sabbath claes. The horse wid need fresh beddin, an ane o them needit liniment rubbit inno a sair jynt. Sally Bruce wis swypin the stoor frae ilkie neuk wi a vengeance, near rubbin the face aff the flagsteens at the ootside door. The maid, Meg Ramsay hid born the brunt o the seen-tae-be-Hogmanay cleanin yestreen, an hid socht fur a full day aff. The sweep hid bin in an cleaned the lum a wikk syne. The New Year maun hae aathin clean an bonnie fur it, inside an oot. Minnie, tho, wis dowpit doon afore the fire, haudin a cauld cloot

tae her hett lug an her fat lip, tae bring doon the swallin, watchin the flames lowp up atween the broon peats crummlin inno the aisse an smush at their reid, reid foon.

In the hinmaist oors o the auld year, Sally Bruce sat Minnie doon tae spreid egg sandwiches, while she bakit scones an bannocks an biscuits fur first fitters comin. Aa the curtains hid bin cheenged, even the beds hid bin strippit an clean beddin pit on. Dumplins war biled, tae see them intae the new year fur kinsmen wad tramp roon fur days seein aa their closest friens tae hansel the year. Matthew Bruce cam back intae the hoose fin the horse war sattled, an the milkin ower an by, wi Matty at his heels, an uneasy kinno a peace atween them. The clocks hid tae be wun up, the auld granfaither clock at the fit o the stairs first ava, an the fires biggit up tae keep the cauld oot, fur the snaa wis driftin roon the waas like a cat rubbin itsel up agin a cheer wintin a dry lap tae sit on.

Afore they kent, sae eident they'd aa bin, the Auld Year'd gien wye tae the New, an Jock Dow the grieve wis chappin at their door wi a bottle..a reidheidit chiel, their first fit. Nae lucky, bit fit could ye dee? Turn him awa on sic a nicht as yon? Sae in he cam, wi a kirm some cottar bairns at his tail, singin their yearly pairty piece:

Rise up guid wife an shakk yer feathers,
Dinna think that we are beggars,
We're anely bairnies cam tae play,
Rise up an gies oor Hogmanay.
The nicht's cauld, oor claes are thin,
Gies a piece an let us rin!

Minnie's fowk tuik the bairns in aboot tae the fire tae gie them a heat, an a tangie, an a drink o rose-hip jeely, an tae dry oot their weet mochles afore Jock Dow led them aff like the Pied Piper tae the neist hoose.

'It's easy kent he's nane o his ain,' Matthew Bruce said as he tuckit his wife aneth his oxter. 'Or he widna be sae keen tae shepherd aa ither bodies' bairns. An I dinna suppose it wad hae onythin tae dee wi the fack that fowk'll aye open their door tae a bairn...they michtna be sae keen tae let Jock ower their porch his lane wi a drooth like his.'

Neither Minnie nor Matty war lat oot tae sing roon their doors, sae Hogmanay feenished seen efter fur them. Sally Bruce gaed her loon his first dram, fin his faither's back wis turned, an Minnie got a hett milk drink an a steen pig tae takk tae bed wi her. Afore she knelt doon in her goon on the cauld fleer tae say her prayers she tuckit her dallie Betsy inno

her bed, an creepit ower tae the windae tae look oot ower the parks an the starny lift. It wis a peety Jock Dow hid bin their first fit o the Year, tho Da hid lauched an telt her ma it wis aa superstitious styte. The snaa wis dingin on rale faist an saft noo, wi flakes the size o peppermints, the lug o the nicht takkin tent o the littlin's prayer:

Noo I lay me doon tae sleep
I pray the Lord my sowl tae keep
If I should dee afore I wakk
I pray the Lord my sowl tae takk
May Thine be the Pouer an the Glory
Foriver an iver an iver
Amen

For some reason it wis affa important tae Minnie tae say three forivers, like it made it three times as likely the Lord wad takk tent o fit she wis sayin tae Him. She winnert far the Lord tuik fowk that dee't, like Jessie Mathiesoon, puir glekit Jessie, fa's place in the kirk as yet hid nae bin fullt.