

Ian Brotherhood

Tales from the Great Unwashed

Had a wee flurry just after lunchtime there with a crowd of folk over for a christening up the road, but I don't think they'll be back. I heard one of them moaning about the dust on the top shelves of the gantry, and another on about there being no soap in the ladies. Makes you wonder what sort of crowd the baby's let himself in for.

This morning, about half-eleven I suppose, the doors wasn't long open and I'm standing here looking at the sun on the pavement and wondering if I should get Diane in early and head off down the coast for a few hours, a walk along the beach, a wee bit fresh air for the brainbox. I'm just standing there staring at the pavement, at the shadow of the lamp post across the road, the exhaust fumes blue in the light, and I'm sort of half-dreaming about whether or not to take the binoculars and the wellies and that when a movement sort of snaps me awake and this wee dog, some kind of mongrel terrier I suppose, this wee black and white patched fella goes walking backwards across the doorway. Very strange that, so I pour a coffee from the pot and stand there and drink that and try to remember if Da ever mentioned anything about dogs doing such a thing, but I don't recall it ever being a hot topic. Cats, black, aye, crossing paths and all that. Dogs, no. Cats walking backwards? No. And then I get this picture of a dog and a cat walking side by side backwards under a stepladder, so I stop drinking the coffee and call Diane. She can make it a couple of hours early, so I'll be off right enough, and with luck there might be a decent sunset.

See what it is? It's over having words with Mary again. That's about a dozen times since her sixteenth I've had to talk to her about them so-called friends. Last night she's got them in again up the stairs, that Shona one with her sister Jools. That Shona's too old for a start. Eighteen. That's too old for my Mary. And there's something about that wee Jools one I don't like. She looks at me a bit weird, them big eyes staring at you, but you wouldn't trust her at the baby-sitting I can tell you. So anyway, I go up there, tell them that's their car, 'cos their Da owns Starnight Cars, and he always gets one of his lads to drop by if they're here late. So it's half-nine and the car's there. And when I knock the door I hear Mary shouting come-in, so in I go, and they're about the computer, shoulder to shoulder the three of them, and it's some game they're at.

Have a look Da, says Mary, and she sort of leans back so I can see the screen, and it's like some video effects thing they're about, and Mary's working the controls there, and she's a young man, maybe about ages with herself, and he's stuck in some sort of a dungeon, pure blackness all about him. Watch now, says Mary, and the music's right creepy too, not the likes of your old black-and-whites with the church organs and that, but these mad screams and laughs and scrapes and cutting sounds all mixed in, and I'm getting a bit of the

shivers with this, and the girls all sort of scream at the same time as this thing appears on the screen, and Mary jiggles at the keyboard and makes her man pick up this baseball bat type of thing. This creature gets closer, and you can see now it's a terrible thing altogether, with the body of a big baldy dog hopping about on its back legs, and the face on it is like Lester Piggot, only if you imagine your man with a great long jaw like a donkey and the teeth on him is like the shards of glass along the wall-top, and the whole thing is the colour of dead skin and covered with these big wet warts about an inch broad and high, and the music goes mental and the thing hops right up to the screen, covering about the same distance that I go lepping back over the carpet. Mary jerks back in the seat and makes the fella bring down the baseball bat and she catches old Lester-face right on the side of the head, behind his ear it is, and you hear this crack like a melon hitting the pavement, and the creature lets out a howl and staggers back, but not fast enough 'cos Mary belts it another one with this bat, and this time the whole side of its head caves in and this like snake of blood and brains comes leaping out its skull and lands on the deck like a shot jellyfish, and all the noises is like things popping and farting liquids. Are you wanting a shot? asks that Shona one then, but I'm halfway out of the room already and not feeling too good either.

I wash the face and give myself a wee talking to in the bog and work it out before I go back in. I'm not good at this type of thing, and thank God Mary's been as good as she has 'cos I couldn't have been doing with it all the time.

You girls better get yourselves downstairs. Your car should be here by now. And take that game with you and make sure you never bring anything like that into my house again. Do you understand? I say, and it's like I must be putting on my sternest voice 'cos they're looking well wary and hurt, but they both look up at Mary, and Mary looks at me like I'm daft and says, it's mine Dad, this is the one I got with the birthday money you gave me. I told you about it, remember?

So that was that. They got packed off home and we had an argument. In the end, I lost, and I know she knows it. If I would have been more interested I would have known, but she's still got the receipt so I'll be taking it back to the shop and having a wee word with Peter, 'cos he's the fella with his name on the slip. Makes me wonder if Peter's got any my Mary's age. Better for him if he doesn't.

The drive down is slow and frustrating, and a right shouting match I end up having with a fella behind me who won't make his mind up to overtake or sit halfway up me pipe. The coastline is dirty. The secret bay as we called it isn't as secret as it used to be, and it's not with folk being there, but the stuff along the tide-lines. Old johnnies, womens' towels and weathered parts of children's

toys, a baby's arm sticking out of the sand, and gloves everywhere —ladies' pink gloves, a navy's heavy-duty crimson rubber like an udder, and wellie boots and wheelie bins and all manner of shite in great long lines along the sea-wall as far as I can make-out.

But I walk along anyway, and glad of the binoculars too. A sailing-boat far away is getting tossed about grand-style by the waves, and even the seagulls manage to find out what hovering's like, stuttering up and down in the wind. I reach the dunes where we used to meet when we were over on the holidays. We even managed to build a sort of hut for when the rain was on. I poke around a bit beside a couple of the sandy banks, checking close to see if there might be any trace of the door frame and timbers we used, but of course there's nothing. The dunes I remember have probably long since joined the sea.

There's a sunset happening over behind the islands, but heavy black clouds from the sea obscure it, and grey bands connecting to the sea on the horizon tell me that I've walked enough and should return before the rain hits land.

Back down past the dunes, then the great slope of the sea-wall where there's still the barbed wire and the bunkers for the guns, and right battered it all is too, with slabs of concrete as big as the pub shifted and cracked by the winter waves. I have to sit down. My legs are tired, and that's maybe only six, seven miles at most. I don't want to go home with Mary and me not talking. I can't handle it. And that game still has to go back. It's in the car, back in its box. The picture on the front is of a big veiny red blob, and the only thing that tells you it's a head is these two mad red eyes like glass. I wonder what Mary has inside her head, what she dreams about when she's not well, or when she's scared. The worst I ever got was a witch under the bed. I shiver and have to check behind me, along the cracked ridge of the wall, feeling that something is watching me. But there's nothing there. The furthest of the islands is now behind the wall of grey rain, and it'll be here before long. I'm too weary to start walking again, so I make a smoke before heading off, and sure enough I've the smoke only half-done when the wind turns right powerful and the rain comes in sidey-ways like pebbles, and it's maybe thinking about the likes of that animal in the game, and that thing staring at me out of the box in the back seat, but it's like eyes are all round me, all watching, all chasing me along the beach, and the cloud is over and above and low, blanketing the whole sky, and I don't remember being so scared for a very long time.

I want to get straight upstairs and dry off, and the shivers haven't stopped, even with the heating up full in the car, but Diane calls me across as soon as I'm in the door and says there's a man been waiting to see me since an hour after I left. He looks angry about something, and he's quite drunk, but he hasn't caused any bother so she hasn't warned

him yet, but she doesn't want to serve him any more. I follow her backward nod to where this tall, thin-faced fella is leaning against the bar, hand cupped about his pint, and craning up he is to look at the screen of the telly above him. I don't recognise him at all. Not a regular. It's possible I've seen him passing or in another pub, but there's nothing clear, and that's with a good study at him in his reflection behind the gantry.

I get upstairs and change. I don't even shower, just have a quick rub with the towel and on with a fresh shirt and breeks. I look smart enough, but I know I'm in no fit state to be scrapping. The shivers have got worse, and a bit of temple pain there, and that's always unusual for me, means I might be in for a wee bout. I summon Frank from the end of the bar, careful not to open it too far in case your man should see. Frank is only just in, so he's sober enough. I tell him what's what and he goes back to his seat.

The guy gives a wee bit of a start when I say my name. He's been watching the cricket on the telly, and looks like he was enjoying it too until I turns up.

So you're Mary's father, says he, and I nod and extend my hand. He takes it slowly, and his hand is big, but the shake isn't a showy, dramatic one. It's solid and brief. He's got a good drink in him, that's clear by his eyes, but he keeps his voice clear enough, and straight to the point he is.

My daughters were here last night, he says, they like Mary a lot, and so do I. She's been in our house now three, four times, and every time not a bit of bother. Your Mary's a good lass Mr Doohihan. She's bright and well-liked. I'm glad she gets on with mine. She's a good influence on them. But this stuff they're getting into. You'll forgive me speaking my mind, but it's not right.

So that's it then. Their Dad. Jamie Kelly. Starnight Cars. A lot of stories about this man. A lot. I point at the pint, he looks and nods, hands it over and I top it up from the tap in between us. He sniffs, looks down at the bar. He's not pushing

for an answer, and there was no aggression in the voice. He deserves an explanation. I put the pint before him, and he slides two coins across. I leave them be.

I'm sorry, I say, and he doesn't look up from examining the head on the pint.

So am I, he says then, and raises the glass and drinks, and continues the slow swallow until half of the liquid has been drained.

I know that Frank and Joe and Bobby will be halfway along the bar behind me, pretending to watch the telly—there's no sense that the man will do anything, but that's as dangerous a time as any.

He sniffs again and wipes some froth from his lips.

It's a hard job right enough, looking after them, he says, but we can look after each other's a bit, you know, keep an eye out and that. Know what I mean?

He extends his hand again as he stands up. He's really very tall indeed. I take his hand, and it's the same shake as before, short and firm, but this time I notice a lump and see the wart on his middle finger as his hand goes to zip up his jacket.

Nice pint you serve in here by the way, he says, and off he goes. Frank and Joe and Bobby come buzzing over with questions, but I don't hear them. I go to the toilet.

So it's ten minutes I'm at it there with the nail brush and the green pan scourer, and the flesh is raw but I keep scraping and pour another dash of disinfectant into the basin.

Better safe, that's what Dad always said, 'cos you never knew what some of them have at and about their gobs over a day. Glass carries the fingerprints and a lot more you can't see. People with scabs and ulcers on their lips. People who let their nose run all over their mouth when they've had too much. Stag night? You wouldn't believe it. People who swill their drink rather than drink it, so that by they've got to the bottom of a pint

there's as much spit as there is beer. I smooth on more soap, and wonder where she is, my Mary. She should be back any minute.

She'll be with her friends, doing whatever they do when their Da's aren't about. There's anger deep in my belly, just the same as you get before a fight, and I close my eyes and I can remember it all like switching on a light, me and her Mum on the shore that night, and it's a warm, clear memory, how sweet and soft and young she was, the lights of the town in the distance and the coolness of the sand below, and I open my eyes and the anger's away and Christ I wish she was with me, right now.