

## The final winter

by

Tim Collins

'He *is* Australian,' Isla insisted. 'Or a New Zealander,' she conceded, hedging.

Isla did not have an easy way with accents.

'He doesn't *speak*! How can you possibly tell?' Her brother was not convinced.

'He does ... to a point. Every week he orders his cup of tea and biscuit.'

Stuart rolled his eyes. 'Well that settles it then,' he said before going to retrieve two battered electric urns from the church hall's kitchen.

It was Wednesday night in Edinburgh, which meant that Isla and her brother Stuart were helping their mother Geraldine feed the homeless at St. Anthony's. And it was to St Anthony's that a man of indeterminate age - early forties, maybe - and national origin had gone every Wednesday for the past thirteen months.

Shit. S'time to go.

*Well get up then.*

Bet ya that chick'll be there. Do-gooder.

*So what if she is? Haven't cracked so far.*

Maybe. Nice here today...

It was time to go and he wasn't at all keen on leaving his spot in the sun.

*C'mon, get up! There's no free food here.*

He didn't normally find it so difficult to get going. But it was sunny today and his preferred Edinburgh hangout was particularly enticing when the sun was shining. Protected from the ferocious winds that buffeted the city and tucked suitably out of the way, it was the ideal spot to while away the hours. See, there were no typical hobo hangouts for him. No sleeping in doorways; definitely no begging. He'd rather steal. He had

standards. And pride. In his mind, being homeless was unfortunate; *looking* homeless was just lazy. This attitude made life considerably more difficult, but as his matriarchal Grandmother had been wont to say, "pride is painful." But had he neither pride nor exacting standards he may never have discovered this place of relative tranquillity in the grounds of St Cuthbert's in the city's West End some eighteen months ago.

So, better hit the road.

*Ya think?*

S'pose it'll kill an hour. Inside too.

*'Atta boy. Streets tonight, back 'ere tomorrow.*

Yep. Okay. Let's go.

A lesser man might have stayed put and foregone the church hall refreshments, but he'd proven many times over that he was not, by any stretch, a lesser man. Eighteen months on the streets of Edinburgh - a city on the same latitude as Moscow and Copenhagen - was evidence enough of that.

He pushed himself up, brushing a bunch of deciduous by-product from the legs and arse of his worn moleskins. He paused. He looked around at the autumnal mess, the fallen leaves signalling only one thing to him - the approach of what would be his third winter down and out in Edinburgh. Not good.

Gettin' cold now, he thought.

*Could be a lot worse.*

Not long 'til it is.

*Aw, you've hacked two winters in this joint already. Who knows, global warming...*

Ha! Not this joint. Guaranteed. Where's my beanie?

He loosened the drawstring on his navy blue canvas tote and retrieved a tatty, black beanie. It was a no frills 'wharfie' style affair. Owing to its poor quality and cheap materials - he guessed it was about ten percent wool, the rest some sort of perto-chemical derivative - it was pilled and pock-marked with small holes that were bound to grow larger as autumn became winter. It was not the beanie he'd arrived with at Edinburgh's Turnhouse two years ago.

Not long after it had all turned to shit he'd fallen asleep on a bench in the Old Town. Bad move. Anyone on the streets with even the slightest interest in self-preservation will tell you that you *do not* fall asleep anywhere in the Old Town. The pubs and clubs are open late and attract beer

swilling office workers, students, Polish tourists and, he'd noticed, a staggering number of 'hens' and 'bucks,' all of whom spewed out onto the dewy cobbled streets at closing time.

That night, weary from a day wandering a city abuzz with Festival attractions, he'd taken his rest on one of the marble bollards that line the Royal Mile under the pretence of watching some home county chaps perform a trite Bush-Blair sketch. Back then he was new to the game and he tended to roam aimlessly, all the while trying desperately to look like any other tourist. After a painfully wooden performance, the troupe packed up; their indulging audience dispersed, and most of the tourists and festivalgoers started moving on. Without the auditory stimuli to keep him awake, and in spite of his better judgement, he'd started to doze off. But sometime thereafter, between fits of sleep, he'd heard something. What he heard was loud, rowdy. Focusing his tired eyes, he saw a group of 'lads' approaching. But before the adrenaline had kicked in they were upon him: heckling, poking and prodding him, all the while swaying all over the joint drunk - three-in-the-fucking-morning-drunk.

Cunts, he recalled, trying not to well up.

*Hey, Who cares? How long ago was that? You survived!*

Could've turned very nasty.

*Yeah, but it didn't. Besides, you're a tough motherfucker.*

Yeah, real tough...

But it was a long time ago and it certainly hadn't ended as gruesomely as it could have. Apparently bored of mocking him and slapping him around, the lads ripped the beanie from his head and staggered away, affecting pathetic set rugby plays with his rolled up headwear.

Scots can't play for shit, he'd thought at the time. But then again, there was a good chance that they weren't Scots. He'd noticed that the city was full of **Poms**.

Nevertheless, thanks to the lads, he'd spent the night with his head wrapped in a spare shirt. Fortunately, he found himself a replacement the very next day. It was perched atop the iron fence bordering the Western side of Queen Street gardens on Dundas Street.

Time - must be 'bout quarter past.

He pulled his shitty fence find down over his greasy hair.

Beanied and de-leaved, he picked himself up from the bench, acknowledging with a glance Elizabeth 'Lizzy' Jane

MacIntyre 1906-1995 - to whom Dougall James MacIntyre had dedicated this, their "place in the sun" - and set off. He walked through the church grounds, circumnavigating one of the oldest graveyards in Edinburgh, and exited in the Western end of Princes Street Gardens.

Situated atop a rocky crag, a good 100 feet above the valley floor of the Gardens was Edinburgh's famous castle. He looked up.

Open today. Not a breath o' wind.

He'd tried to visit when he first arrived in the city, but had been turned away. Gale-force winds had forced its closure; not an uncommon occurrence the guards on duty informed him. The last thing the authorities wanted was for a tourist to be hit by a flying slate.

'A flying what?' he'd asked.

'A slate, ken? A roof slate; a tile.'

Apparently flying slates weren't uncommon in these parts. In fact, many of the city's co-called tenements, were, owing to their advanced age and state of disrepair, liable to losing the odd slate in high winds. If the wind was strong enough to bowl over an elderly woman on Hanover Street - something he'd witnessed - then it was clearly powerful enough to dislodge a rickety, old slate from a rooftop.

Quiet in 'ere today.

The gardens were deserted. The city's commuters would be chained to their fluro-lit cubicles for another forty minutes yet and the few tourists in town - it not being peak season - would likely be traipsing up and down the Royal Mile. He had the path through the gardens to himself. Between St Cuthbert's and the amphitheatre he didn't see a soul.

Perfect.

He considered these ideal dawdling conditions. Unmolested by poorly attired office workers or digi-SLR wielding tourists, he was free to stroll through the park and amble up across town at a rate that turned a fifteen-minute walk into a forty-five minute time filler. Perfect. At least, it should have been. Something didn't feel quite right.

*Déjà vu, maybe?*

Nah, it's not it.

*You're just being soft. Just get your tea and ...*

Jesus! I'm not soft! For Christ's sake.. It's like, nah.

*C'mon, spit it out.*

...Sounds ridiculous, but it's like I'm not me.

*Oh Jesus.*

Whatever it was, he was having trouble putting his finger on it. There was no obvious cause of the undiagnosed sensation. He hadn't done anything different. He was no colder or hungrier than usual. He wasn't even bothered by a migraine, which, over the past several months had become a semi-regular occurrence. All he could figure was that there was something different, weird maybe, about this particular Wednesday evening. He ambled on; his mind wandered.

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BOOM, BOOM, BOOM.

The force shook the entire phone booth.

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM.

'Get up, pal!' the bearded giant yelled through the phone booth's door. 'Ya cannae,' he started, trying to push the door open only to have it stopped by a pair of leather boots. 'Ya cannae keep on like this. Cannae survive like this, Pal.'

His sobbing slowed and he looked up at the man beating his fist against the glass. It's gotta hurt, he thought, his mood lightening.

'Pal!' The old bastard was serious now. 'Pal, get up! Get up the noo!'

Get up the *where*? he wondered.

Not for long though. He got up quick smart, if only in to stop the guy shouting. The last thing he wanted was a scene. He could live without the indignity of rubber necked strangers coming over and peering down at his teary visage.

He opened the door warily, unbeknownst to the fact that a new life awaited him on the other side. He was newly homeless and the old bastard from Glasgow was going to put him right about that.

What followed that night fifteen months ago was a crash course in street urchin philosophy, conducted over the course of a few hours on an unusually close, moonlit night on Carlton Hill. The Weegie's central point?

'Basically, Pal, you'd do best t'nae think. Ken what I mean? D'nae think!

Remarkably, he did *ken*. What he gleaned through the coarse Weegie accent made sense. It was simple. Thinking about his tragic fate wouldn't do him any good. He had to survive. And survival meant not thinking. The Weegie's philosophy had worked a treat and kept him out of the phone booth and on the straight and narrow. Up until today at least.

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Fortunately, his mind didn't wander quite that far. But that very phone booth was just across Princes Street from the path he was strolling along now. Were it not for the hill between he and it, he would have been able to see it. It was just as well that he couldn't. That sort of memory could ruin him.

Time is it? Hate dawdling. Doesn't look good.

*Take it easy. You might be a New Town chap with nothin' else to do.*

Yeah, right.

His demons were keeping him busy. The nearer he got to The Mound, the more intense their mental debate became. But having become accustomed to not feeling, he didn't fully recognise its significance; or the nervousness, the apprehension that was weighing him down.

Soon enough, having taken a circuitous route and a good forty minutes to get to his destination, he arrived at St Anthony's. True to form, he loitered near the doorway, allowing others to advance in the queue as he checked to see who was dolling out the fare.

Better time it right. Don't want to get the Sister.

*What? Not feeling chatty tonight?*

Piss off.

He had his reasons. After all, another of the beastly Weegie's maxims had been '*d'nae trust do-gooders!*' Good advice, he'd thought at the time - in the interests of emotional self-preservation - and given this chick struck him as definite do-gooder material, he was sticking to it.

*Ooooh, your girlfriend's just gone out the back. Better hurry.*

Gimme a break.

Of course, he did hurry. It was the bloke and his mum serving. The sister had gone out to the kitchen, possibly to collect another urn. There were usually three on the table and

from his spot in the queue he could only see two. Luckily, he proceeded up the line quickly.

'Cuppa tea and a biscuit, thanks,' he muttered.

Think the do-gooders would remember my order. How long's it been? A year at least with this lot.

'Sugar with that, aye, mate?'

The crap he had to put up with. The nosy sister, clearly fascinated by the fact that he sounded different from the rest of the down and out NEDS, junkies, loons and Poles; and her smart-arse brother.

Yeah, fucken sugar. Jesus!

He didn't take the bait, instead treating the query as though it were a rhetorical question not requiring an answer. The brother well understood. He was too chicken shit to mess with him so he dutifully deposited a heaped teaspoon of sugar into the mug.

He nodded and took his tea and a serviette containing three Tesco-brand digestives.

Refreshments in hand and, thankfully, still no sign of the sister, he made a bee line for an empty pew towards the back of the hall. He settled himself into - well, onto, really, the pew and dipped a biscuit in his tea.

Wasn't stingy with the sugar at least.

He stirred the tea then raised the mug to his chapped, wind-burned lips.

Jesus. The Pisser.

*Aw, go easy on the poor bloke.*

'Ah, aye!' The Pisser was struggling. He was standing, swaying really, at the makeshift counter, waving his fingerless-gloved hand in the direction of the large silver urns that housed the tea and what was passed off as coffee.

Not a lot of choice, buddy!

*Oh, I dunno. It's tough. Hmm, cheap, bitter tea or dirty dishwater passed off as coffee? Decisions.*

'Ah, please Sir may I have...'

'Have some more, aye, Oliver?'

Cheeky prick.

The Pisser looked confused, then, well, pissed. It's doubtful that anyone in the hall who would have been surprised if The Pisser had leathered the cheeky bastard right then and there.

'I cannae give you any more until you've had some to begin with, can I, pal?'

Oh Jesus.

'How about a coffee, then? It's great. Nice and fresh.' Geraldine, Stuart's mother stepped in, clearly trying to avert a leathering.

Fresh? As if!

*Well, technically, it was made tonight.*

'Aye, a'right. An' six biscuits, deary.'

'How about a 'please', Jimmie,' she said, not looking up from the mug she was filling for him.

Jimmie was beginning to sway again. 'Aye,' he said, or shouted, really. Everything Jimmie said seemed to be for the benefit of everyone in the same postcode.

Just then, the sister, all strawberry blonde ponytail, Navy blazer, crushed Oxford shirt, jeans and ballet flats emerged from the door to the left of the counter. She was struggling with what must have been a very heavy urn.

Shit! Forgot about her. Head down.

*Come, come now.*

Having deposited the urn on the table, Isla took a paper serviette, filled it with a few digestives and handed it to Jimmie who staggered to the nearest pew.

He was more than a little rattled. Distracted by Jimmie's more boisterous than usual entrance, he'd forgotten all about Isla.

Floor, floor. No eye contact!

*Easy.*

Fortunately, a motley crew of junkies arrived at the counter. Isla was occupied again.

He sat there, anonymously, he hoped; warming his cold, weathered hands on his mug. Despite the Isla factor, Wednesdays at St Anthony's offered about as much comfort as he would get all week, so he preferred, if possible, to stick around as long as he could. Early on, he'd found the church

hall comforting. After a while he'd figured out why. The varnish on the old pews smelled exactly as it had at St Michael's, his parish church growing up.

He sat on his tea until it was barely tepid and the volunteers had begun packing up. Then he took a final swig of his cold English Breakfast, registering, for the first time, the inherent irony. He wrapped the two remaining digestives in the serviette, placed them in his jacket pocket and made his way toward the counter at the front of the hall. Unlike many of the ill-bred hobos, he always returned his mug to the counter, despite the fact that this invariably brought him into contact with Isla. And so it was again this week.

'Hiyya!' said Isla, as chirpy as ever.

He placed the mug down on the table.

'Getting cold now, isn't it?' she said, immediately feeling stupid for stating the obvious, and worse, insensitive for reminding the homeless chap how cold it was outside.

This chick is killing me.

*Then beat it!*

But instead of hitting the road, he hesitated. There was something about her comment that he found pretty hilarious. Notwithstanding the banality of commenting on the weather was the fact that it was *always* cold in Edinburgh. His cracked lips formed the unmistakable outline of a grin.

Isla was encouraged enough to follow him towards the door.

'Oh, Jimmie's going to get himself killed,' she said.

Nothing. Silence. The two of them stood in the doorway observing the unfolding calamity. Jimmie had staggered straight out into the peak hour traffic and was presently holding up a cabbie that was none too pleased about it.

'Too right,' he answered, eventually, turning to acknowledge Isla's presence there in the doorway.

She was stunned. 'Well... good night, then' she said, beaming.

'Good night,' he replied matter-of-factly before striding out into the drizzle. It was time to find somewhere dry to spend the night. Tomorrow he'd work on getting his arse off the streets and out of Edinburgh.