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OOR HOOSE

I WAS CONCEIVED ON ISLAY, the whisky island, off the west coast of Scotland and I was a mistake. It's a desolate place even now at times, dramatically beautiful at others. Then, I imagine, its bleak landscape matched the mood of my mother Mary Halbert, née Gray who, even in shopping lists, would sign herself thus. Sometimes she'd even add 'and oblige', for some mysterious reason known only to her. It was the year after the war ended, a time when she was almost certainly still grieving for her first husband George, killed while serving in the army at the battle of Monte Cassino, near Rome, in the closing days of the war. Mary was pregnant with me and in no hurry to return, as she must, to her cool and disapproving mother, brothers and sister and the hospital on the mainland.

My father James – but always 'Jimmy' – Dunn from Glasgow had also been married before and his wife had died in childbirth (the child too had died) on New Year's Eve a few years earlier. Maybe he was still emotionally attached to her. At any rate he was not eager, by all accounts, to rush into a second marriage just to stop me from becoming a bastard.

Eventually my mother travelled back to Clydeside, arrived at the hospital in Johnstone, near Glasgow and gave birth on the 11th of February 1946. She might have raised me as a single parent, she told my sister many years on, had she not felt angry and indignant. As a result, a few weeks later, she presented

herself at her lover's door with a newborn baby, me, in her arms, and announced to Dad, "Right, here you are!" I can just see her doing that...

The sight of me quickly concentrated my father's mind or "brought him to his senses" as Mary was to put it years later. Jimmy had been so angry at the news of the pregnancy that he had not spoken to my mother for months. So my mother had to plan her after-the-birth strategy. She would never have just dumped her baby and walked away, she told my sister, but the reality of me, pink, alive and his, together with her blunt announcement, was intended to make him do the decent thing. And it worked.

The pair soon married and began to make a go of family life in their 'hoose', a newly-built council house on the Midton estate built on farm land above Gourock, population then about 5,000, on Scotland's west coast, 25 miles 'doon the watter' from Glasgow. The move to the 'new hoose' was after a spell renting a room in Kempock Street in the centre of Gourock from my Granny Gray – Mum's mother – who had a sprawling flat on a first floor where she rented out rooms.

My earliest memory of the new Midton house is of there being no furniture whatsoever. We used the boxes in which oranges were delivered to the town's shops in those sparse post-war years, to sit on and eat off. Presumably they also formed the bases of our beds. These boxes were treasured by people like us at that time, not just because they were handy in the home but they were also useful on the fire when there was no money for coal. Which in our case was often.

We didn't stay long in this post-war 'scheme' house, almost certainly because we couldn't afford the rent. We soon moved to another 'hoose', actually a run-down upper flat of three rooms and a kitchen, with a big 'back green' – garden –

in which to hang washing and grow vegetables, up a 'close' in Cove Road, Gourock. Again we were council tenants but the rent was far lower. We were probably also much happier as this was a bit of a 'real hoose' – a flat – not a new-build in the middle of a field in the hills behind the town.

As an address, 47 Cove Road didn't have a lot going for it except that it was right on the promenade with the most spectacular views over the Clyde. Nowadays weekenders from Glasgow would fight each other to buy it as a "bijou" weekend retreat.

Look in a guidebook to Scotland today and you'll see Gourock described as a "shabby old seaside resort" or in other disparaging terms and the polluted state of the Clyde is roundly deplored. But, back then, my 'hoose' was part of Scotland's 'Riviera', a pretty coastal town, built to one side, or 'awe tae wan side', close to industrial Greenock with its declining shipyards and about a half hour drive to Glasgow. As soon as I could, I learnt to swim in the crystal clear and icy cold waters of the River Clyde. Mum took off her shoes on the promenade, tucked her skirt into her knickers and paddled out to a depth where I could swim. She then said, "Right, I'll hold your chin James to keep you afloat; now move your arms like this." She demonstrated the swimming movement and, in a couple of minutes, Mum's hand left my chin and she made for the shore, wet knickers and all. Well, I probably sank a few times, but I could swim!

Gourock was a spot for city dwellers to escape to for holidays and look out on a usually calm, mirror-flat River Clyde towards the beautiful scenery of the seaside village of Kilcreggan and the Holy Loch on the opposite side of the Clyde. The town came alive for "The Fair", two weeks in July when most of Glasgow took its annual holiday and people headed

'doon the watter', usually by steamer, to Gourock or Largs, further south, or Dunoon on the opposite side of the river. These were thriving holiday spots in an innocent, less sophisticated age, before the onslaught of the package holiday to Spain, which virtually killed them off. There were nine busy shipyards in the Clyde area around Gourock, Port Glasgow and Greenock in the 1950s. Very little remains today of the shipyards, cranes, freighters and liners, but then anything from small boats to super tankers were built there. Greenock, the next town up the Clyde from Gourock, was the first Scottish port to import sugar in bulk from the West Indies and a great refinery industry grew up there creating many thousands of jobs. In the same century, the 18th, Greenock was the birthplace of the great inventor James Watt whose improved steam technology changed the face of the world. Greenock's most recent invention, it is rumoured, is the deep-fried Mars Bar.

Cove Road, Gourock, is cut in two by Tarbet Street. Houses on one side were grand, comfortable villas, some split into two, many then owned by men in middle management at the shipyards at Greenock such as Scotts, where so many famous ocean-going liners including the QE2 were built, or the then newly-opened offices of the American computer company IBM, still among the biggest employers in the area. Many of the people who lived on that side owned cars, some of them snazzy models. Others like the Tough family, whose sons Frank and George went to my school, Gourock High, had an old open-topped car – a bit of a bone-shaker but a car none the less – which would now qualify as a classic. I don't remember the make but, being the early 1950s, it was probably an Austin Seven or Eight. If I waited around long enough some Sundays, they'd take me for a ride down the coast but, often as not, they'd set off without me. They also had a motorcycle

and sidecar on which Mr and Mrs Tough in full leathers would take themselves off in a flurry of exhaust.

We didn't live on that side. We lived on the council side; a row of terraced dwellings, each two homes, one on the ground floor the other on the first floor, both equally damp, with outside stairs and toilets. Today all these humble houses have been torn down and the whole character of the place is changed. Then these 'hooses' or flats were distinctive and to live in one of them marked you out. Despite my father's earnings from the pubs – firstly in Glasgow and then in Greenock – and I never knew how much those were, and my mother's from cleaning other people's houses and offices at a rate of about two shillings and six pence an hour (12½p), we were poor, very poor.

Number 47 had no bathroom but a toilet at the top of the back outside stairs. It had running cold water in the kitchen and a great deal of running green mould inside the bedrooms. My little bedroom was at the back of the house, overlooking the outside stairs and the garden, or the small jungle where potato plants, roses and weeds vied for space, that passed for one. The travelling knife sharpener would visit the area every month. We'd know he had arrived because he'd play the spoons to tell us he was in the back green. A scintillating tour de force of tinkling spoons would bring out the neighbours with their blunt knives.

As a small boy I would often play on the sandy beach just below the house. I didn't build sandcastles. I'd build little houses with driveways and roads on which to park my second- or third- hand Dinky toy cars. Later on I enjoyed sprucing myself up to be taken across the quiet road to sit on a seat on the promenade, watching the world go by. In my memory, these always seemed to be cloudless, sunny days but they couldn't

have been. Scotland's west coast has some of the worst weather in Great Britain.

When I wasn't happily on my own, amusing myself with the sand, I was playing with the daughters of our neighbours, the McDowalls; Rena, Bunty, Helen and Margaret. More precisely, they were 'playing' with me: bullying, teasing and generally beating me up. These four tomboys, with their brother Stephen and their parents, lived up the same close. They were a very rough, wild family indeed. Mr McDowall seemed permanently out of work and on the dole. Mrs McDowall and my mother had a strange love-hate relationship. It was love when Mary was carrying my sister and Mrs McDowall was also pregnant. As soon as they each gave birth, hostilities recommenced. What had started this war of neighbours I don't know. But almost any issue, from the positioning of the 'middens' – rubbish bins – to washing-line territory, seemed to provoke a fierce exchange of insults, threats and tussles between the adults and, sooner or later, unfortunately, secondary skirmishes between the girls and me. Needless to say I never won and I retain a small battle scar under my right eye, where Rena whacked me during one incident.

On the rare occasions when we were all on friendly terms, I would enjoy playing 'shops' with the girls and, even more fun, join them in dressing up in our mothers' clothes and high-heeled shoes. Rena and her sisters didn't know it, but I enjoyed swishing a skirt and clip-clopping grandly around the close far more than they did.

Indoors I fought a losing battle to retain any sort of dignity. But alas we couldn't afford dignity. While I was small enough to be picked up, my mother would stand me in a basin in the kitchen every morning to wash me, a process watched by the whole family and by any passing neighbour. My sister, born

six years after me, got similar treatment. What a day it was when we progressed from heating water in kettles, pouring it into basins and rushing to use it before it got cold, to getting it from a gas geyser over the sink!

For most of the year our home was cold, damp and bleak. Central heating was light years away from Gourock, never mind number 47. In the winter, which seemed to be most of the year, I'd wake up in the morning and scrape ice off the *inside* of the window. When it was very cold, my parents; Sinclair, my half brother, ten years older than me – my mother's son from her first marriage; my sister and I huddled together at night in one bed for warmth. My regular sleeping arrangement, though, until I progressed to my own little damp room and single bed at the back, was to share the set-in bed off what we grandly called the sitting room – nothing more than a bedroom with a sofa, in fact – with Sinclair. So the first erect penis I experienced, apart from my own, that is, was my half-brother's, as we experimented as boys can do.

Luckily I got on well with him, and my sister and I rarely fought. I was her babysitter when Mum and Dad would pop out for a social evening to one or other of the pubs in Shore Street: The Darroch or The Wherry. Later, she would go to work as a print assistant at the same place I landed up, Simpsons. She went on to create her own life happily married to a welder, with whom she had three sons, John, Paul and Mark. A sweet-natured child, my sister was always number one with Dad, definitely a daddy's girl. But even when my father and I were cool towards each other, I never begrudged her his affection.

During the winter days we would gather together in one room around a coal fire and 'coorie doon', snuggle up as Mary would put it. When there was no money for coal, as was

frequently the case, my mother and I would comb the shingle shore of the Clyde near our home (we wouldn't have called it a beach – that sounded far too upmarket) where we would trundle around collecting wood to dry and burn. The shore would also provide for us in another way, as Mum had found the favourite corner where the small McLean's Shipyard and Boat Repairers next door to us dumped miscellaneous waste. My ever-resourceful Mum somehow discovered there were clippings of copper and brass among this waste and she and I would rummage each day and collect them, then take them to the scrap dealers at the nearby Gourock Quarry where they were weighed and sold. The money, usually a few shillings, would help put food on the table.

Our food was bought at Colquhouns, a little general store on the corner of Cove Road and Tarbet Street, where Mum had a running weekly 'tick' account. Many were the weeks when she hadn't the funds to clear this account but old Mr Colquhoun was usually understanding and patient as he was with many of the other families. We weren't the only locals with regular cash shortages. No matter how much Mary owed though, Mr Colquhoun always had a big penny caramel sweetie ready for me – provided I had the penny. The tiny shop was full of goodies from gobstoppers to pear drops, lemonade, the ubiquitous Irn Bru, fresh bread and, of course, Mum's all-important Woodbine fags – she was always a heavy smoker, latterly up to sixty a day.

Apart from money worries, ours was a life free of the sorts of stresses many families seem to suffer today. We didn't worry about our 'status' – we were too busy just staying alive – and we certainly didn't worry about security. Perhaps I was too young to be aware of it, but crimes such as burglaries and street violence were almost unheard of then. Anyway, we never

locked the door up the close at the top of the stairs for the simple reason that there was nothing in our house anyone would want to steal. Almost everything we owned was what other people discarded or came from jumble sales. My mother was a serial jumble sale attender. I would certainly know where to find her every Saturday at two in the afternoon, an hour before the opening: at the front of the jumble queue at the local church hall, whether it be St John's, Old Gourock or the Bethany Hall.

Probably a lot of the things she brought home from these sales were useful and welcome. A selection of oddly coloured woolly jumpers for me, suits for my father, shirts and shoes for all of us, for example. But I remember other items Mum brought home, the useless ones, so much more vividly. These would include women's clothes to wear at a cocktail reception – rabbit fur stoles and hats, elbow-length evening gloves, cocktail dresses far too long or tight for her. Mum never received an invitation for such a function, of course, nor probably would she have recognised one if she had, but it didn't blunt her enthusiasm for her 'party' wardrobe. Discarded wedding hats were another of her specialities and she would parade around the kitchen amid great laughter in her new finds. They would never be worn outside and never returned to another jumble sale but merely left in numerous piles around the house until she eventually found someone to give them to.

Thinking of those piles of clothes reminds me of Mary's way with words. She had a whole stream of sayings which would come into play at various times of the day. When I was getting up in the morning, knocking into bundles of jumble in every room, looking for my shirt or pants, I'd ask her if she'd seen them. She'd be sure to say, "They're up the wife's arse in the brewery". Now, I've thought about this for years and I still

cannot work out where the saying comes from. Whose wife? Whose brewery? She would only ever say, "It means I don't bloody well know where your pants are!" as she made the tea and toasted the bread on a long fork at the fire for breakfast while getting ready herself to clean other people's houses.

If she tuned into the Third Programme (now Radio Three) by mistake, she'd snap, "Turn that stuff off – that's the music that killed the cat!" or "That music would tear the shirt aff yae!" On days when the weather was good, she'd observe, "The coos (cows) are doon – it's going to be a lovely day." I'd say, "But Mum, the coos are sitting down because it *is* a lovely day." If your palm was itchy, she'd urge, "Quick, rub it – that means money!", so I went around wishing for itchy palms. She also read the future in tea leaves in the neighbours' cups, predicting sudden fortunes, wonderful romances or mysterious woes, so building up their hopes or plunging them into despair. Many a day I'd come home from school to find the house in complete silence. As I opened the kitchen door I'd see Mary looking quizzically at a tea cup and its leaves. Looking on would be a few neighbours, hanging on her every prediction.

Then there was Griff the gas salesman. His main claim to fame was selling a gas fridge to the Dunn household in Cove Road. On the face of it this was good news for the family. But Mum's inability to remember, or indeed afford, to put a shilling in the meter to ensure the gas pilot light did not go out meant that the fridge – and consequently the food – regularly went off. I suppose it was lucky that there was rarely much food in the fridge.

Mary was absent-minded in other ways too: when trying to light the living room fire she regularly set the chimney alight and filled the house with sooty smoke. And she was so engrossed in the television coverage of the funeral of Pope

John XXIII in 1963 she forgot she was filling our funny little washing machine. The water overflowed and flooded the kitchen of Mrs Lyons, our inoffensive neighbour downstairs, who was also quietly watching this funeral on her TV set. I came home from school at least twice to find the house full of firemen when Mum had set fire to the chimney.

Shopping trips also brought out colourful and unfathomable Mary-isms. We'd be walking along Kempock Street on a Saturday morning doing the weekly 'messages', heading for McKechnies the butchers (she always called meat 'butcher's meat', as though there were another kind). In the queue she'd invariably begin talking to someone. When they'd been served and had left, she'd say to me, in hushed tones, "Lovely wummen there. Always remember, James, the best Christians are no' always in the Church!" Aye.

Mary had no dress sense at all – she couldn't afford it. If anything, her style was Jumble Chic. She'd wear anything as long as it was warm and kept out the west of Scotland weather and it fitted her reasonably well. She'd go through a stage of wearing wide-brim sun hats in winter, all from jumble sales, and I remember her "tammy" period when she bought a selection of these brightly coloured caps and wore them around Gourock to great acclaim. She would wear flower-patterned pinnies around the home and for her work in other people's houses, a packet of fags never far away. She always smelt of fresh soap with a touch of nicotine as I'd snuggle up to her as a child.