

In The Car Park Of The City Of The Dead

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I could tell it was my Da a mile off. He's not too tall but stands out with his gallus walk – like John Wayne did. So I waved across the car park and he waved back. As he got closer his other outstanding feature became clear, his three-quarter length double-breasted, corduroy coat with the teddy bear buttons. It must be nearly as old as me. I remember him wearing it when I was a kid and it going on the bed on cold nights. Ten guineas he had paid his old pal Manny Marx for that coat – ‘on the grip’ at ten bob a week – and he never let anyone forget his grand purchase, remembering always not to refer to his ad hoc HP agreement.

“A week’s wage for a coat. Quality costs, ye know and this’ll last me a lifetime.” – He was correct.

He put out his big hand. His grip was still strong despite his age. I remember being glad the auld fella didn’t go in much for hitting us when we were kids. He left that to my Ma and her bamboo carpet beater. Many was the time that an ornate pattern was left on the arse of my unfortunate chastened brothers and me. I’m almost a foot taller than the auld man but never as broad of shoulder or as strong. He worked in the yards in all weathers – tough manual labour. Apart from his sideburns, his hair was still blacker than mine and in the same style as it was when he bought the coat. Folk used to say he looked like the old Hollywood actor Ray Milland.

“The heaviest thing a smart man should lift is a steel ruler.”

I remembered him telling us that more than once, especially near exam time.

I was glad and a wee bit surprised to see him though, but there we were in the “Car Park of the City of the Dead,” the grandiose but apposite nickname we had given years earlier to the Glasgow Royal Infirmary’s car park. There was rarely a month went by when we were kids that the auld man did not take us to some museum or other free tourist site in our city. Our trips were usually made in the back of his old Bedford van. My brothers and I were loaded in sitting on cushions from the sofa, my old mum and him up front with the flask and the ‘pees’ and we’d be off – The People’s Palace, the Kelvingrove Art Gallery, and Provand’s Lordship – (Glasgow’s oldest house). The favourite for me – and the one I always think of when I think of him is the Necropolis, Victorian Glasgow’s gothic graveyard the mausoleums of which dot the high horizon behind the Royal Infirmary like giant scattered chess pieces. He knew the place like the back of his hand. As a boy in the Depression he slept there when he was made homeless. He had memorised the position of the graves of some remarkable folk and he’d show them to us. We always started with a monument to a man whose most famous work was remembered – his only tribute. It read: ‘William Miller, the laureate of the nursery, beloved of children everywhere. Author of Wee Willie Winkie.’ But there was no William Miller or anyone else under that stone and my old man knew why and told us often enough.

“The monument might call him the laureate of the nursery and a’ that, but he’s no here. He wisnae rich enough, ye see. He was an east end man like us, frae Tollcross. At first he wis not considered good enough for the Necropolis, although ah don’t think he’d be too bothered, eh? Anyway, then some high heid yins got the gither and

bought the memorial, but it was long after he died. The city fathers gave him his place, eventually. It was *the* place to be if yer deid, ye know!”

I was thinking about those trips as the auld fella walked towards me. It was great to see him again – and he was right about that bloody coat, it looked the same as it did when he brought it back from old Manny’s shop in the Gallowgate.

“Hi, Da. How did ye know I’d be here?”

“Yer Ma told me you had decided to get out. It’s a Sunday where else would you go when ye’ve no’ visited in a while? Yer a history buff, like yer auld Da and you’ve always liked the stories. Only you get paid for it now, eh boy?”

“Aye, you’re not wrong. It’s great to see you though Da, out the blue like this.”

“Don’t get a’ unnecessary now, boy. We’re only goin’ fur a walk, no’ an Atlantic cruise.”

“Aye a’right. Ye know what I mean.”

“Ah know, boy. Ah know.”

He walked fast for a wee man with wee legs, even at his age he could pace me out and I was a bit puffed as we reached the cemetery gates to start our tour, like we had done dozens of times before. The gates were half way up the hill at the back of the Infirmary. You could look straight into the windows of the wards. And I know you can see the graveyard very clearly from the ward windows. I remember in the mid-sixties when the auld man was in there for a big op when his stomach ulcer burst. He almost died. You would never have thought so when you went to visit him. After the op he was there for a week or so. Each night my Ma and the weans would trek to see him with the usual fruit that would not get eaten and magazines and books that would

get devoured. My Da was a fierce reader. Once when my mother handed over his goodies at the start of a visit he told her:

“Look oot there, Margaret. As if it’s no’ bad enough that there’s a bloody graveyard outside, the bloody council’s gone an’ floodlit it noo! It’s a tourist trap apparently. Not exactly a good advert for the doctors, though, eh?”

Now – as back then – he set off at his usual stride. I remember us kids running every so often to catch up when he’d shout for us to come and see another stone of interest. At least now I did not need to run after him. Which was just as well because my unfitness is one of the penalties of never having to have lifted anything heavier than a steel rule. Of course, I knew what was coming next. The itinerary was etched in my memory. At each stop we would get the same routines but we never complained. He was a good teacher and he always ended up at the same graveside at the end of the tour, it was a triptych of tombstones upon which he once slept in the 30s when he was a homeless boy. I had no reason to think today’s trip would be any different. Like when I was a wean, I knew what was coming but I just loved the stories and the closeness.

As we walked through the winding paths of the Necropolis, the auld man always imparted his knowledge as if it were for the first time.

“The great names that made this city and some o’ the bastards that screwed it are here, ye know. But they’re not a’ toffs.”

As we walked he added: “Think about it boy, there were around 50,000 burials here, even allowing an average of five under each stone, that leaves a considerable number in common graves, ordinary working folk. No monuments there, eh?”

“But to be fair there wis some respect because common graves are constructed with as much care as private lairs. First a long pit was excavated, about 12 feet by

nine wide, lined with brick, then a cast iron lip wis fixed tae the inside edge of the top of the lining. As the chamber filled up, cast iron grilles were riveted on the lip, tae protect against the ‘Resurrectionists’ or ‘body snatchers’ ye know, like Burke and Hare in Edinburgh? It wis the same here, they plied their trade with shady doctors of the time.”

These stories scared me as a kid. He told me that after the Necropolis opened in the 1830s it became a tourist attraction. Victorians would promenade in it, a posh walk in the park to show off their Sunday bests.

“Everybody buried here has their name in the Mitchell Library, did ye know that, boy?” he continued.

Boy! It’s been a while since I was a boy. He made me laugh; I am older now than he was when he took us round here in the 60s and 70s.

“I know, Da, I know. Ye’ve telt us before, eh!”

“Aye, weel, don’t forget it, smart arse!”

We laughed and joked as we walked on. The sun was warm. I was actually tiring but the old man was going on like a trotting pony.

“Hey, Da slow down a minute eh,”

“Whit d’you mean slow down? Ya big Jessie, keep up. You could dae wi’ staying aff the beer awhile boy yer getting like a puggy!”

“I bet they don’t half miss you doon that Diplomatic Corps, eh?”

“Aye, very droll, boy. Jist keep up.”

I was only a few feet behind, but even if I was yards away I could walk the route. I could do it in my sleep, probably. We came near the top of the hill where the mausoleums are the size of small flats. Even in death Glasgow snobs were in a league of their own. My Da was back in the lead. He disappeared round the corner and for a

minute I thought I'd lost him. I knew where he was going though. I cut across the lawns and passed William Miller's grave (beloved of children everywhere) got back onto the main path and started on a slight incline – and there he was in front of the monument that summed up and reinforced his life's belief system. The one that was always the last stop on the educational tours of my childhood. I stood with him before the triptych. It was in descending order of height, from the left. The first was in tribute to Lt. Col. Donald John Tennant, who 'departed this vale of tears' on March 22, 1868, also on the stone were the details of other Tennants now beyond the vale. The next stone was more of a novelty. It was easily two feet shorter, just as ornate but with the details of only one 'tenant'. It read: 'Here lies Rab, our beloved collie. He was a friend to all who knew him and a steadfast and faithful servant. Departed from us on that darkened day, May 19th, the Year of Our Lord 1865.' The third stone has but three words upon it. It has the dimensions of the sort an old country milestone would have had. It was about 18 inches high and around the same width and depth and simply read: 'Our beloved Nanny'.

“Look at that, son and remember it. This is a great example of how the boss class works. Even in death they're looking down on the workers.”

He was really preaching now and I loved it. I always did. All his life he fought from the Left. I knew he thought I was just a sappy liberal, not a blue-collar fighter like him. He never let his disdain deaden his pride. He read everything I wrote, since I was a kid winning essay prizes. Here with him now, warm, slightly out of breath and not feeling too great. I listened and felt better.

“Just read the tombstones, and look. The dog gets a fucking name – and an inscription! The nanny – a person for God's sake – who probably knocked her pan in for that lot of ungrateful bastards, disnae even get the dignity of a proper memorial. It

was probably the same in their big hoose, she probably got the wee room there an' all – don't ever forget it, boy.”

“I won't Da, I promise,”

I wanted to reach out and hug him. He was smiling.

“Time for me to go back tae yer mother noo. And you should be getting back tae, it's not the time yet, eh.”

“What?”

I felt woozy and all around me started to look like heat haze and then faded to black. I could feel my breath grow shallow.

Ward 49's window was more panoramic than it was when my Da had been a patient.

At the foot of my bed was a young, fresh-faced doctor.

“You're a lucky man – lucky that we caught you in the car park. You were on your way back to your car after your interview with our Professor MacNaughton. He saw you from his office window. You collapsed in the car park.”

“Aye, I remember, I think. What happened?”

“You've had a wee heart episode. Not an attack, mind you, but you'll have to be careful. Pack up the ciggies, eat less and don't booze as much.

“Maybe take up walking?”

Author's Note: My grateful acknowledgement to “Digging into Glasgow's buried past”, an article by Glasgow historian Dr Ronnie Scott: published on July 6, 2005 in *Scotland On Sunday* – for some of the technical and historical data in this story.