

THE GOOD COMRADE

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The paper fan above Auntie Rae and Uncle Leslie's mantelpiece is huge, just like the one at Lucky House, where we went for my big brother's fourteenth birthday. That was a great night. Everybody had a right laugh – my Da put the chopsticks in his mouth to look like giant fangs and had us all laughing as he sang 'I am the Walrus'. The waiters didn't laugh, but they never do. My mammy even got a wee bit drunk on Pimm's. My mammy never drank, only on special occasions. My Da drank a lot. Sometimes him and my Ma would fall out when he did, but that night, it was great and naebody fell out. But when they did fall out ah would end up at Auntie Rae's and Uncle Leslie's room and kitchen. That's what you call a wee hoose up a close. It was dead wee but dead good. It had a bar and a shelf full of wee bottles from all over the world that Uncle Leslie brought back. He brought the fan back from when he used to be a polis in Hong Kong. Him and Auntie Rae lived there after the War. Auntie Rae said Uncle Leslie was a hero. But my Da said he was a diddy. Once Auntie Rae was at oor house and they were all talking about Uncle Leslie.

'He wis at Dunkirk when the first shots were fired, wis ma Leslie,' said my Auntie Rae.

'Aye and he wis at Glesca Cross when the second one went aff,' my Da said. Ah remember thinking, 'That wis fast' and then my mammy said my Da should shut his face and gie his arse a chance. 'You should gie your arse a chance, it's fucking big enough,' my Da said.

But naebody laughed then. His voice was angry, so folk knew not to laugh. It was not like in the Lucky House. Our Gerry and me went with my mammy and Auntie Rae that night too. My Da never said anything when we left. He just poured himself another Black and White. Ah thought that was daft because it's no' black and white, it's gold.

We were back in the morning. We always went back after he went to the yards. That's where my Da worked. He made ships. Not like the wee ones in the bottles at Auntie Rae and Uncle Leslie's, but real ones like the QE2. His big sausage fingers are too big to work on wee ships like that anyway.

Ah like nearly everything about Auntie Rae's and Uncle Leslie's, except two things that ah found a wee bit odd. One was that my auntie and uncle had lassies' names and the other was that my Uncle Leslie wis deid. But Auntie Rae used to talk about him like he hadn't died after his face went all yellow and he had to go to the Royal Infirmary. Him and my Da were pals sometimes and fell out sometimes. But they used get drunk together lots of times. Ah think my Da missed my Uncle Leslie and ah think that he didnae really think he was a diddy. Ah think my Da was a bit of a diddy when he was drunk but ah would never say so or he would skelp my arse till it was red raw.

But he never really hit me, unless ah wis a bad boy - even when he was drunk he was usually a'right wi' me, but he was still scary and his voice sounded like the one Dr Jekyll had when he was shouting and roaring when he was Mr Hyde, who was really Fredric March, who is an actor. We went to see that picture at The State one night when my Da was drunk. Me, Gerry and my Ma sat in the front row and had sweeties and ginger and everything, and when Fredric March became Mr Hyde my mammy said: 'Look, it's yer Da!' We all laughed, even my mammy. Then we went to

Auntie Rae's and Uncle Leslie's again. Ah liked it there. My mammy slept with my Auntie Rae. We slept in the pull-out bed that went back into the wall. Pure deid brilliant, except when just before bedtime Auntie Rae would tell us to tae say good night tae Uncle Leslie and we had tae kiss the picture of him as a polis man. Pure deid weird, that. The picture had a bit of writing on it that folk call an inscription and it said: 'To my dearest, Rachel, love Les, Hong Kong, September 1962.' That was when ah was born, ten years ago, and ah found out that night that my Auntie Rae's real name was Rachel and my Uncle Leslie, spelled with an 'ie' was for boys. That's what my mammy said. When ah asked if his second name was Hong Kong, she laughed and said: 'Don't be so daft and don't let yer Auntie Rae hear you saying that.'

When we got back to our house, my Da had gone to work and the house was spotless. It always was spotless after he'd been on the drink. My mammy said that sometimes she wished he'd get pissed more often cos he did the house lovely, so he did. But it was the bit before it all that annoyed us.

But when ah was having my Frosties (they're grrrrreat!) ah was thinking about Gerry McMahon (he's no great – he's a two-faced fuckin' bastard, so he is). He lives in the house up stairs and we go to school wi' our mammies and he's like ma best pal then, but when we get to school and we are alone he picks on me and slags my Da and says that his Da says my Da is a drunk and a commerist and that my Da should go and live in Russia with some guy called Crushed Jeff, who ah think he might be a wrestler. He said his mammy said that my Da can always find money for the pub but no' for feeding his weans... that he's on strike a' the time and thinks he's 'the big Ah am', so he does. Ah don't know what McMahon's doing that for, but he shows off in front of the lasses and makes me feel like a diddy. Ah have got a plan though. Ah'm

gonnae be a good comrade, like my Granda says ah am and ah am gonnae stand up an' fight. That's what good comrades dae - they stand up and fight when somebody does them wrong, so they dae, even if they're feart. Ah am going to offer McMahon a square-go after school. He's bigger than me but ah'm madder than him and it's all building up and ah'm going to hit him with a fencepost. There's one on the wasteground where we always go for square-goes. Ah'll get him there at four-o'clock and leave him greetin' so ah will and he won't slag my Da anymore either. Ah'm feeling nervous so ah am, but ah'm gonnae walk tae school and kid on everything's OK until later; then ah'm gonnae get in a fight and batter him, ah'm really mad so ah am - mad like Mick McManus ...

Ah never got tae hit Gerry McMahon wi' a fence post. Ah never even got tae the fence post. When we got tae the wasteground the crowd was all shouting '*fight, fight, fight,*' and they went round us in a circle. Ah hated them but ah did the same when somebody else was up for a square-go. Ah could see the fence post lying where ah had put it for easy reach – so much for that. McMahon kicked me right in the grunnies as soon as the crowd started chanting. Then he just battered me and ah barfed on him, which I suppose wis something. But then he wiped ma face with his sicky jumper and everybody laughed and cheered. It was all over in a minute but it seemed like ages – the dirty bastard.

Now it's Sunday, and ah'm in the back room for being a bad boy, waiting for my Da tae come hame to gie me a leatherin'. And it's a' that bastard McMahon's fault again. Ah wis oot in the back court playing wi' my motors all by myself. My Ma telt me to get oot fae under her feet until Bonanza came on. Ah love Bonanza, so ah dae, it's pure gallus. And so are a' the Cartwrights. If my big brother wis as big as Hoss ah

widnae be in any bother at all. But I am and that's that. Anyway, while ah wis playing wi' my motors, ah spotted McMahon coming into the back court and he didnae look so brave when it wis jist me and him, nae crowd shouting and bawling and nae chance of kicking me in the grannies by surprise like he did on Friday, the bastard. Ah shouted tae him: 'McMahon ya fuckin' bastard, come ahead, ah'm gonnae tober you right up, ya tube!'

Next thing ah know ah feel this right hard slap. Right across the face it was, and it stung like buggery so it did, and ah said 'fuck's sake' when ah felt it and then ah felt ma ear being pulled right up. It nearly came aff. Then ah saw my Ma, and then ah saw McMahon running away up the close laughing. Ah started greetin'. My Ma said: 'Ye foul-mouthed wee besom that ye are, wait til yer faither gets in!' She dragged me into the back room and left me there. She must have had came oot tae tell me that *Bonanza* wis on. Ah bet McMahon saw her tae, the bastard. Ah could hear the music – it was at the bit where the map of Carson City starts burning. Ah wis gonnae miss it and wis gonnae get a leatherin' frae my Da into the bargain. Ah don't know why folk say 'into the bargain' cos it disnae sound like much a bargain tae me.

Ah hate the back room; it's got loads of auld crap in it. Ma granny died there. I gave up trying tae listen tae *Bonanza* – ah bet that bastard McMahon up the stair is watching it though, and he wis gonnae get his Sunday dinner and ah would be sent tae ma bed wi' nae supper or nothing. My Da usually got in just after *Bonanza* and we'd have our dinners after he got washed. But he'd have tae gie me a leatherin' first. Ah flicked through some auld books frae my granny's auld bedside table. There was none that ah liked, so ah decided to look up dirty words in the big dictionary tae take my mind off things. That's like a dirty word itself if you break it up like this: *big dic-tion-ary*. Usually that would have made me laugh inside, but it didnae noo. Won't be

long til my Da's in. Ah hope he's in a good mood. If he is, he just kids on that he's leatherin' me – but if he's in a bad mood, my arse'll be red raw, so it will. So it was back to looking through the dictionary tae take my mind aff things. Then the theme tune at the end came on. Not long now. Ah felt like Little Joe in last week's episode when he was in the jail at Dead Man's Gulch for a shooting that he didnae dae, an' Hoss and Adam came wi' their Da, Ben, and some ropes, and pulled the back aff the jail-house. Ah bet Hoss could have done it himself if he had tae, but they used horses - probably better for the getaway and that. Ah could hear ma Da at the door now and my Ma shopped me as soon as he came in. She said: 'Ah've put oor Francis in the back room. You'll hiv tae sort him oot.'

Ah couldnae help thinking right then that I had a lassie's name like Uncle Leslie and maybe ah wis gonnae be deid like him tae.

Then my Da said: 'What's wee Frankie boy done noo?'

That sounded like a good mood answer.

My Ma said in a kinda whisper they dae in the films when they're talking tae the audience and the other folk in the picture are no' supposed tae know: 'He called the boy McMahon a 'fuckin' bastard' When she said 'fuckin' bastard' it wis really dramatic and ah thought 'that'll be the end o' any good mood for my Da.'

Then ah heard my Da saying: 'Where the fuck did he get that kind o' language frae?'

The back room door opened.

Ah dropped the dictionary.

My Da came in.

The belt was aff his dungarees.

Ah knew ah wis fur the high jump.

Ah wis bein' a good comrade, like ma Granda telt me tae and standing up fur my Da, standing up fur the cause, even though ah wis feart – noo ah'm gonnae get a doin' for daein' something my Da does a' the time. But ah cannae tell him anything, can ah? Ah hate commerists... and Gerry Fuckin McMahan. An' noo ah'm gonnae get ma arse skelped red raw. It's jist no' fair, so it's no'.