

E Profeesir

It wis ane o ey verra rare days in Aiberdein seein as it wis a verra rare day. E sun wis roastin an ah wis pechin along Holbourn Junction wrappit up in suit an tie an tar fumes, an cairtin a muckle brief case at seemt tae wey a hunnerweyt. Ah wis bilin. Ah leaved in a pokey wee flat in Union Grove back en, an ah wis oan ma wey tae wirk at e Grammar Skweel far ah wis ane o e Inglis teechirs. Evin ower e racket o aa e traffic at wis goin up Holbourn Junction ah cud suddin hear iss body singin frae somefars. He hud a richt guid tenor voice an wis beltin oot 'Fa Wid Troo Valir See?' at e tap o is lungs - a hymn ah mindit frae ma ain skweel days as we hid hid tae sing it ivery assembly fir about the hale sax yeer ah wis a pupil. Fan ah gocht awmaist as far as e lichts at e tap ent far it jins Union Street, ah finally spied Aiberdeen's answur tae Pavarotti staunin up tae his oxters in a coned-aff trench at e side o e pavement. He wis swingin a pick tae accompany is singin, an ah hae tae admit ah wis quite impressed wi is performance.

Fit a sicht he wis tho! Is hair wis unwashit an aa ower e place, he hid a beard like a thorn buss, an is claes wir manky an tattered. E maist remarkable hing about im tho wis his een – ey sparkilt an shone an mist naehin aroon im. Aw en aw, he luikit like an animatid tattie-bogle wi a richt unsettling stare. Fowk gauin past turnt er heids awa tae avoid een contact. Ah wis about tae dae e same fan he lookit straicht at mi. He stappit singin an cried oot.

'Is at ye, Sandy?' I thocht ah wid curl up an dee. Abody lookit roon tae see fa iss specimin wis hailin as a freen, an a few o em wir snigrin fan ey saw is pal wis in a suit. Ah made oot ah hidnae hird an a kep waukin, but e nix hing ah kenned he wis threadin is wye throo aw e ither

navvies lik a futtrit tae get tae a wee bitty ledder an clim oot. He wis richt aside me afore ah kenned onyhing an he grabbit ma haun an stairtit pumpin it in a haunshak.

'Luik ah da ken fa ...' ah begun, soondin at ma maist pompous an teechirly.

'Iss me, Kenny. Kenny Macdonald,' he intertruptit. 'Foo ye dooin? It's braw tae see ye again.'

A broad smile, pairtit at manky blek beardie - an ah kenned exakly fa he wis.

'Fit! Kenny? Fit ar ye daein doon a hole?' Ah askit, nae richt sure fit tae say.

'Ah'm diggin,' he answerit. Ah suppose ah askit fir at. En Kenny threw his heid bak an shootit,

"O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay! He chortled in his joy." Great tae see ye, min! Ye luik lik yir daein ok fir yersel'

Ah coud see oot o the cornir o ma een at some o e ither navvies wir winkin at each ither fan they heard Kenny quotin verse, an ane o em cried oot,

'At's e Profeesir aff again! Someane git a dictionary reedy!' E hale trench o navvies thocht iss wis great an ey aa stairtit up lauchin.

Kenny Macdonald.

We hid baith been at skweel thegither but we hidnae really kenned each ither bak en. Wid baith been scholarship pupils at Gordon's an we'd hid a noddin acquaintance - kenned each ither's name an at wis about aw. Fan we baith wint tae Aiberdeen University, an baith wint tae study Englis, wid baith been nervishly lookin roon fir ony friendly face at e Freshers' Wik. Ye mind fit at wis lik. Naebody wintit tae seem lik ey wir freenliss an aa body gathert thegither lik lambs wi ony body ey reconisd frae skweel. Ah wid hae lued tae hae bin able tae tauk tae e quines lik some o e cool loons cud, bit aifter gangin tae an aa-loon skweel fir sax year ah wis awkward an tongue-tackit wi lassies. E ainly quine Ah'd spikken tae wis ma wee seestir – an

she didnae coont. She aye terrified me. Actually, she still dis. It wis a relief tae see ane or twa kent faces tho.

Fir at first year me an Kenny uised tae pal aroon e githir. Fan we hid e cash we uised tae gang fir lunch up at e tap flair o e refectory far iss nice deenir wifie hid taken peety on us cos we wir scrawny lookin loons, an mair affen an no wid hae a free bridie or twa thrown in wi oor deenir.

At e wikends we wid gang tae e Union oan Skweelhill. In e eichties it wis huge wi loads o bars an a braw snooker haal. Ey hid great bands plyin ere, an some richt near the knuckle comics as weel – aa fir a quid or twa (an ye aye hid e bus fare hame).

E freedom Ah suppose we aa felt wis great aiftir e constraints o skweel. Kenny an me maistly bonded ower music. It turnt oot we wir baith massive fans o Rory Gallagher an we uist tae mak sure we ayewise hud tickets fir is concerts at e Capitol. He wis aye brilliant; naebidy cud ply lik Rory Gallagher. His fingirs uist tae flee ower e fingerboard an he aye hid a lookie o tranquility oan's face as he plyd. Ah'v aye thocht at lookie wis e lookie o genius. Even fan Ah stairtit gaun steedy wi a lassie in e class, Ah still made sure me an Kenny gocht tae aa e concerts we cud.

Aa wye throo at first year Kenny wis e star o e class. He enjoyt hissel bit aa wyes took his wirk serious. He beat me hauns doon in aa e class exams an ah hae tae confees he wis electric fan he spake at e tutorials. Er wis a passion aboot him fan he spak aboot literature an a tranquility at remindit me o Rory Gallagher plyin guitar. It wis a passion Ah cud nivir equal.

It wis at e endin o at year tho at ahin wint wrang. At first Ah jist thocht he wis nervish fan he cam oot wi some strange stuff, but Ah kenned it wis real trouble ane day fan we wir at a lecture on Dickens in New Kings. Kenny sat doon aside me lik usual but seemt affa agitativ.

'Fit ye daein fir lunch?' he askit.

'Refectory?'

'Ah need a wurd.'

Fan wi gocht tae e tap flair an wir sittin in wir usual seats ah turnt tae Kenny an seid,

'Fit's up min? Yir hell o a serious e day.' He tak a lang breeth in an jist seid, verra calm, verra quiet,

'Ah'm drappin oot. Ah'm jist scunnert wi iss. Iss is e laist day ah'm gaun tae be here.' Ah wis shokit, an aa Ah managit tae spluttir oot wis.

'Fit? Fit wye?'

He gocht up an began waulkin awa.

'At's it, Sandy. Sae lang. Dae weel.'

An at wis it.

Ah nivir wirkit oot fit hid actually happint wi him He drappit aff e face o e earth as far as e fowk at e University wir concernit. Ah tried tae git him in his room in the haals latir at aifternoon but fan Ah gocht ere e room was aa clear'd oot an empty. Ah tried aince or twice tae git in touch wi him throo his parents but, although ey wir aye polite, ey wir aye evasive an nae encouraging fan ah askit foo Kenny wis daein and if Ah coud see him. Ey let slip aince that he hid gaun tae London, but ey widnae say mair an at. Ivery time Ah thocht about Kenny aifter at, Ah aye foon masel cryin him, 'Puir Kenny'. Ah wis the first o ma family tae gang tae e University, an e thocht o thrawin it aa awa jist seemit tradjik tae mi.

An noo, Ah'd foond him bak in Aiberdeen doon a hole.

'Kin wi meet up, Kenny?' Ah askit. 'Fit about haein yir tea wi us?'

'Us?' askit Kenny. 'Fa's us?' Ah'd forgot at he widnae ken Ah wis leevin wi Sarah, e girl at Ah'd been gaun wi at University. Ah wis in danger o bein late fir wirk tho, sae Ah jist gied him e address an telt him tae come roon aboot seevin.

It wisnae a guid move, at. Fan he arrivit at e flat, Sarah mad it richt clear she wisnae impressit by him. She didnae care muckle fir him fan wid been at Uni thegither, but fan he arrivit wi manky hair, teeth an claes, she fair made him feel unwelcom. As soon as we hud finishit eatin Ah suggetit a wander tae e Grill an we set aff quick smert.

Wi a couple o pints afore us, Kenny relaxit a bitty an we wir able tae spik aamaist lik we hid afore fan wi wir students. Ah askit him firstlins fit wye he hid jackit in e University. He paused fir a minity afore he answerit.

'Ah hid tae leeve,' wis aa he sed - as if at expainit onyhing. An he widnae be drawn mair.

'Surely tho, ye cannae be contentit digging holes fir iver, can ye? Maun be drivin ye mad!' Ah seid.

'Naw. Feel peety fur e puir laddies in at hole wi mi. Ah kin hink aboot onyin Ah wint doon ere. Wi oot imagination aa thae loons hae tae hink aboot is emsels. Div ye mind: "Ah cud be boondit in a nutshell an coont masel a King o infnit space"?'

'Aye, ah div. Bit di ye nae hae "bad dreams"?'

'Ah sleep fine, min,' he replied.

Ower e nax couple o minths mi an Kenny gocht bak intae e swing o freenship again. Ah saw him neer ivry wik day fan Ah wis waukin tae ma wirk an he wis digging at his. At hole thae loons wis digging fan Ah first seen him agin seemt tae be makkin its wey aa e wey roon e corner o Holbourn Junction tae Queens Road, an en up it! We wid hae a few wirds fan Ah

passit. At leest aince a wik me an Kenny wid meet up fir a news at e Grill. Ah fair lookit forrit tae thae days.

En ain morn Ah waulkit past e hole an Kenny wisnae int. Ah askit ain o e ither navvies, a loon cried Stevie, if Kenny wis puirly. Stevie happed hisel up ontae e edge o e hole an luikit up at mi.

‘Wis he cried Kenny?’ askit Stevie. ‘Ah ainly kenned him as e Profeesir. Aabody cried im at. He aye spak lik he’d swallyd e dictionary. E wis a richt cleevir chiel like tho. Coud teel ye aboot onyhin. Telt us stories as weel.’

‘Fit’s happint tae im?’ Ah askit, stairtin tae feel a bitty fearfu’.

‘He’s buggert aff. Phont e foremin laist nicht an seid he wis awa. Foremin thocht he wis pisht bit, fan e bus arrivit at his digs, e guy fa ains e flat seid he hid packit up an left las nicht. Taxi took him tae Dyce.’

About a wik aifter a cart fell thro oor letter box frae America. Aa it seid wis:

‘Soory. Hud tae git gaun. Ah hae adventures tae hae. Ah’ll see ye suin. Kenny.’

An at wis e laist Ah heerd frae Puir Kenny.

Life his a wye o jist gaun oan, an e calendar flipit thro e days, minths an yeers wi haste. At times tho ma thochts wid return tae Kenny. Fan Ah merrit Sarah, Ah wunnert en if Ah wid hiv askit Puir Kenny tae be Beest Mon if he hid been aroon. Sarah an me baith wirkit as teechurs an eventually clawd e muny thegithir tae pey a deposit oan a semi firthir up west frae Union Grove. Ah caucht masel windrin if Puir Kenny wid hae likit it. Nax hing Ah foon masel a Dad tae ma wee loon, Joe. En a wis a Dad tae a big loon, Joe. An en, tae feenish e circle, Joe gocht hisel intae University lik his Da. Ah wunnert fit Puir Kenny wid o thocht o at: me wi a loon at University.

'It wis fan Joe wis in his second yeer he cam hame aa enthusit an eager tae spik – fit wisnae lik him at aa.

'It's bin brilliant iss wik,' he telt us as he hindit his waashin ower. 'Wi hid iss visitin Profeesir in frae an American University. He wis geein us lectures oan bringin life experience into literary criticism. He's an amazin spikker. Real charismatic, lik. But get iss, Da. He's frae here originally. Is name's Profeesir Kenny Macdonald. He wis at Aiberdeen in e early eichties. Div ye think ye micht hae kent him?'

Ah felt lik someone wis shooglin me. It couldnae be, cud it?

'Ah da ken. Ah wid hae tae see im,' Ah replied, still reelin. Joe took oot his phone.

'Ah'll shaw ye a picture. Ye shud o heerd him Da. He's din aahin. He wis a hobo oan American trains an pikit fruit in California. He wis an extra in filims. He wirkit in Alaska in ile tae. He did hunners o joabs an aa e time he managit tae study as weel. He's a brilliant mon.'

He turnit e screen o e phone at me an ere, aulder an greyer but unmistakable, wis Puir Kenny.

Ah wisnae hearin fit Joe wis sayin ony mair. Ah luikit at e calendar. Ah hid been coontin doon tae ma retiremint fir e laist couple o yeers (twa yeer, fower minths an twenty sax deys noo).

Ah luikit at e waas o e semi Ah hid taken thirty years tae pey fir. Ah thocht o e classes o mair an mair aimless an oot o control kids Ah wid hae tae face oan Monanday, an Ah thocht,

'Puir Kenny?

Puir Kenny ma erse!'