

GIBBIE'S DONKEY

I hear the band jist as I come roon by the gates o' the fitba park an I get thon feelin yi get on a Friday night, wi a good wik's graft ahin yi an the wik-end afore yi, ready for onythin, wi a newly trimmed Turkish Barber haircut, a wad o' notes in ma hipper, an the promise o' mair deals on the horizon. I step intae the Social Club an Big Robbie the Doorman greets me wi an affectionate growl, a wee boorach o' smokers on their wy tae the door jinkin roon his massive frame as he steps across tae spik tae mi.

'He's ben aside the Pool Table' he says, glowerin doon at me like een o' thon Easter Island heeds. 'An dae me a favour Charlie, Tell 'im it's time the Dog wis hame...Eh?'

I nod my heed, steppin past the usual Friday night steer at the Bar towards the Pool Table, Durno wavein ower at me fae the corner table, phone tae his lug as usual, a familiar Grey-Black muzzle pokin oot fae aneath his cheer. She spots me, pokes her heed oot a little further tae mak sure it is me, then she's scramblin oot fae aneath the cheer an trottin doon tae greet me, pushin her heed intae my han as I bend doon and fuss wi her. A Terrier o' some sort wid be the only wy tae describe oor Belle. Wi her wiry, tatty lookin Grey-Black coat and an ill-trickit, street wise look aboot her, she wouldnae win ony Best o' Breed prizes at Crufts, bit she's the cliverest Dog I've ever met. She trots back up tae Durno an jumps up on his knee, waatchin him while he finishes his phone call, an I hivnae sat doon an his phone is ringin again, bit this conversation is short an tae the pint.

'Right' he goes, stickin the phone back in his pooch. 'That's the taxi here.'

Belle jumps back doon on the fleer an Durno stands up, knocks back the remains o' his beer an snaps his fingers, encouraging her up intae his airms again. She springs up intae his bosie, heed an front paaws ower his shooder, lookin aboot her like the Queen o' Sheba, the noise an music nae bother tae her, an we are jist gaun oot the door fan Big Robbie pints a finger at Durno an goes...

'An if that Dog is gaun tae keep comin in here, she's gaun tae hiv tae tak oot a membership.'

...Which is nae a bad crack an raises a wee laugh fae some fowk comin in the door. Belle jumps doon as seen as we are ootside an maks straight for the Taxi, waitin for Durno by the passenger door while he licks his thoom an slips some notes oot o' his waallet, Gary the Taxi Driver oot ower the Taxi an roon tae greet us.

'Aa right boys?' He bends doon tae pet Belle as she dances aboot at the door, eager tae get inside. 'So far am I gaun? Roon tae the Chinese, then hame wi Belle and the Take-away?'

'That wid be brilliant Gary Durno says, coontin oot some notes. 'That's for the Chinese look, it'll be aa ready tae pick up, an this is for you.'

He folds anither couple o' notes intae Gary's han, opens the passenger door an Belle springs up inside, back paaws on the seat, front paaws up on the dash, ready for the off. Gary closes the door, walks back roon tae the driver's side, an jist as he's aboot tae get back in ower he stops and looks ower the reef o' the Taxi at me.

'Oh aye...Yi'r Uncle Geordie is lookin for yi Charlie...Somethin aboot a Shoot the morn?'

'Far aboot is he?'

'He's roon in the White Horse...Right, I'd better get goin...I'll catch yi's later.'

He gets back ahin the wheel and drives aff, Belle waatchin us oot the windae, lookin for aa the world like she's gaun tae wave a paaw goodbye. We hiv baith kent Gary since we were at the School the gither an he's aye happy tae tak Belle hame in his Taxi if she's oot wi Durno an he gets inveigled somewy. The Chinese is probably for Durno's Mam, bit I'm sure I'll get the ful story come time. He offers me a fag oot o' his packet an we baith light up and lean against the waa, the smell o' the aifertneen's rain still in the trees an the Autumn leaves carpetin the grun. It looks as if he hisnae been hame tae change, still in his beiler suit and beets, wi thon battered aul Massey Ferguson baseball cap pulled doon ower his curly sandy coloured hair.

'I hiv a job for us' he says, pleased as Punch. 'Some boy thinks he his Rats aneath his shed doon in the Allotments.'

'Hiv yi been roon past?' I ask.

'That's why wur still oot. I hid Belle wi ma, jist tae gie her a look, came in by the Social Club for a pint on wur wy hame an I got caught up playin Pool for nips...The Band were settin up afore I kent far I wis.'

I shak my heed at 'im. 'So fit about this Rats then?'

'Aye, there's somethin there' he nods. 'There's a run roon the back o' the shed and Belle found anither een.'

'And are they smooth?'

'Na. They're being used, bit it's nae like they're busy. We'll tak doon the Ferrets an the nets an Belle will snap up ony we dinna get, bit like I say, there winna be a lot o' them yet.'

'And fit's he pyin us?'

He taks a draaw on his fag and waatches me through the smoke. 'I wis thinkin we could maybe dae a swap...'

'A swap?' I demand. 'For fit?'

'Weel, we'll see fan we get there.'

He's at it here, bit I'm gaun tae let it go the noo. It's nae like jobs like this are oor breed and butter, and he obviously his a wee deal in mind.

'We're gaun ower tae Mulben tae that Roup the morn I remind him. 'Fan dis he wint us roon?'

'Sunday aifterneen?'

'Aye, that'll be aa right...Yi gaun back in for a drink?'

He waves a han at his beiler suit and beets ensemble. 'I'm nae really dressed for a Friday night oot Charlie, an I dinna wint Big Robbie back on ma case. We'll ging roon past the White Horse if yi like, see fit yi'r Uncle Geordie is needin?'

'Aye, aaright' I agree 'We'll go roon by an see fit he's sayin.'

I wis aa ready for a night oot doon the Fitba Club, bit it's still early an I can aye come back doon aifter we see Uncle Geordie. He's aye been good at pittin work oor wy an he's an entertainin aul bugger.

We heed up intae the toon, young loons passin anither night ahin the wheel o' their cars, cruising an aimless circuit fae the War Memorial tae the fitba pitches on the edge o' toon, heedlights flashin through the trees as we come up the brae and roon intae Castle Street, the juke box blarin oot o' the wee bar o' the Strathbogie Hotel on the corner o' the toon square. A gaggle o' quines spill oot o' the door, obviously on their wy doon tae the Fitba Club, een o' them pintin an accusin finger at Durno as she steps across tae confront him.

'Hiv you been hame yet?' she demands 'Fit about Mam's Chinese?'

Carly is Durno's younger sister, a reed-headed spitfire o' a quine a lot o' us loons wid think twice o' tanglin wi, bit Durno brushes aff her concern wi a calmin wave o' his han.

'Settle doon. Gary his jist this minute gone roon wi it.'

'He'd better be' she threatens 'Yi kent she wis workin late the night...And far hiv you been that yi hivnae been hame?' She purses her lips, fixin 'im wi that look a lot o' quines seem tae hiv perfected, a cross atween scorn and pity for us useless loons, an turns her attention tae me. 'An you'r nae ony better...Nice hair-cut though.'

She steps across tae me, makin wee shivery noises as she rins her slender fingers ower the shaved part o' my heed,

'Pit 'im doon' Durno laughs 'Yi dinna ken far he's been.'

'I'll see yi's aifter' she says, waalkin backwards doon the pavement 'And try and bide oot o' trouble... Eh?'

She hurries doon the road aifter her mates an we heed across the square an doon main street intae the White Horse, Uncle Geordie greetin us fae his stool at the bar. Though a good bit up fae a spit and saawdust drinker the White Horse still his that aul fashioned feel about it, a sparklin weel stocked gantry ahin a solid bar o' polished wid, high enough tae deter ony under-age chancers, nae juke-box, an the best pint in the toon. I order up two pints o' Guinness an a Dark Rum and Crabbies for Geordie, he and Durno de-campin tae a table as the pervious occupants wave cheerio tae Alec the Barman an heed oot the door. I py for the drinks, leave the pints on the bar tae settle an step ower wi Geordies Rum.

'Cheers ma loon' He accepts his Rum wi a wee smack o' his lips an tilts the gless tae his moo.

A Fifty-Something good aul boy, wi a roguish gold tooth smile an a face weathered by a life spent oot on the hill, Geordie his been roon a few corners, and aathing I ken about shootin, trappin, workin wi Ferrets and Dogs, I hiv learned fae him...And a few ither things and aa...First and foremost he's a Keeper wi the Forestry Commission, bit he aye seems tae find time for a bit o' Shepherdin come lambin time, or a bit o' fairm work here and there, and say fit yi like about I'm, bit yi could niver caa 'im idle.

I turn back tae the table wi the pints and sit doon. 'Fit's aa this about a Shoot then Geordie?'

'Yi ken Hughie Coutts...The Keeper ower Clova wy? He's looki'n for somebody tae help 'im oot wi a shoot the morn, an your names were mentioned.'

'Sorry Geordie' I tell 'im 'Were gaun ower tae Mulben tae a Roup the morn.'

'Ach, that's a peety...'

'Aye, I ken' Durno agrees 'He's aaright Hughie, is he?'

I glance ower at Durno and shrug ma shooders. 'Sorry Geordie...'

'Niver mind' he reassures us. 'I'm sure we'll manage...Fit are yi's lookin for ower at this Roup then?'

'Och, onythin we kin maybe dae up and sell on' Durno tells 'im. 'Or spare parts and that. Yi niver know fit we micht fa in wi.'

'So foo's business then?'

'Aye, were daein aa right...Are wi Charlie?'

'Aye' I agree 'We hid a good wik this wik.'

Geordie sits back in his cheer, beami'n at us like a prood parent at the School Prizegivin while I get tae pourin ma Guinness ower my throat. Durno's phone starts dirlin in his pooch and he pulls it oot and pits it tae his lug, listening for a minty afore turnin awa tae murmur a reply.

'So far are yi's heeidid the night then loons?' Geordie asks.

'I wis thinkin on gaun doon tae the Fitba Club' I tell 'im, waatchin Durno as he ends the call and raises his eyebrow at me, glancin towards the door.

He taks a good swally o' Guinness, glancin towards the door again. I set about my pint, waatchin the last o' Durno's drink disappear ower his throat as Geordie gies a wee chuckle, aware that somethin is gaun on.

'Fa wis that on the phone then? Some bit o' stuff I'll bet yi.'

'Now that wid be tellin Geordie' Durno laughs, waatchin me drain my pint.

'Yi nae gaun tae bide for anither een?'

Na, yi'r aaright Geordie' I tell 'im, folowin Durno up fae the table. 'We'll catch yi again.'

'Aye yi'r affa loons' he says, shakin his heed at us 'I'll see yi's later.'

I turn tae the bar wi oor empty glesses, gie Alec a wee wave cheerio an then were oot the door an back ontae Main Street, Durno accepting a fag fae my packet, cuppin a han roon his lighter as we baith light up.

'That wis Gary on the phone.' He says.

'Fit's wrang?'

'There's nithin wrang' he assures me. 'He wis jist sayin that's Andy McLeod hame fae Aiberdeen for the wik-end an he his some lovely weed oot wi 'im.'

Me and Durno dinna mind a wee smoke noo an again. Nae that we wid hae onythin tar dae wi the Young Team that deal roon the toon, an it's nae jist draaw they're among, bit peels an pooder an aa sorts. Andy is mair canny about fit he sells an fa he sells tae, which suits us jist fine.

'He's roon in Gail Patterson's' Durno says, turnin up the road. 'Yi ken fit like it'll be, if we dinna get in quick it'll aa be selt.'

He's right enough. Andy aye his some rare stuff, bit niver that much, an If we ging roon noo were sure tae be near the heed o' the queue. We heed across the road an roon intae North Street, Durno

on his phone tae announce oor arrival, an jist as we pass a naira closie somethin taks my eye. Durno sees it aa an cuts short his call, baith o' us glancin across at een anither, backin up for anither look, an there staring oot at us is a lost lookin donkey.

'Ach, It's Lu-Lu' I laugh, her lugs twitchin at the mention o' her name.

Lu-Lu is Jimmy Gibb's Donkey, a loveable rouge o' a beast that he keeps in the wee field oot the back o' his bungalow. She wis a birthday present for Caroline, the youngest o' his three Dothers, an wee Caroline jist adores her, bit Lu-Lu his a mischievous streak aboot her an it looks like she's escaped again an decided tae go walk-about.

Durno waalks forward and huds oot his han. Lu-Lu his a wee sniff an he reaches oot an strokes her nose. 'We'll hiv tae tak her hame'

'Fit dae yi mean tak her hame?'

'We canna leave her here Charlie.'

'Jist phone Gibbie an tell 'im far she is' I urge.

'No. We'll tak her hame' he decides. 'Come on we'll try an trice her oot look.'

We'll niver get roon tae Gail's at this rate, an I can see my night oot doon the Fitba Club aboot tae disappear in anither o' Durno's hallyracket escapades, bit I hiv tae see him try tae herd this Donkey up the road. He claps his hans on his knees, mackin encouragin noises an calling her name. Lu-Lu disnae move, so he gings up the closie and tries pushin at her fae the ither end, bit she still refuses tae budge, lugs twitchin as a Taxi pulls up at the kerb and Gary gets oot ower.

'I thocht it wis you two' he laughs. 'I see she's escaped again his she? Fit are yi's gaun tae dae?'

'Tak her hame tae Jimmy' 'Durno tells 'im, still tryin tae coax Lu-Lu oot o' the closie.

Gary gies a wee chuckle an nudges me wi his elbow. 'Tryin tae impress Amanda are yi Durno?'

Amanda is Jimmy Gibb's aulest Dother an she and Durno hiv been dancin roon een anither this past while. Aabody kens they'll get the gither seener or later, bit she's mackin him work for it, an Durno probably thinks that rescuin her Sister's wayward Donkey will pit 'im richt in her good books.

'So that's fit aa this is aboot?' I challenge. 'Come on Durno, she's nae gaun tae move...'

'Polos' Gary says suddenly.

'Polos?' me and Durno baith say the gither.

'Aye, Polo Mints, that's her favourite' Gary explains. 'That'll get her movin'

'Costcutters 'ill still be open' Durno encourages 'Go on an nip roon for us Gary?'

'Awa yi go min, I'm workin here.'

'Go on ' Durno persists 'It winna tak yi a minute.'

'I don't know' Garry mutters, shakin his heed and steppin back tae his Taxi. 'I'll see fit I can dae look.'

He gets back in ower the Taxi and drives aff, Lu-Lu waatchin us an takin aathing in, bit still showin nae sign o' movin.

'She's a bonny beast though' Durno says admiringly.

I hiv tae agree. She is a bonny lookin beast, wi een o' thon fluffy kind o' coats some Donkeys hae, clean and weel kept, wi a cheeky lookin face that endears her tae aabody that kens her. The noise o' a car oot on the road his us turnin roon tae see if it's Gary back wi the Polos already, baith o' us huddin oor breath as the unmistakable markins o' a Police Car cruises past athoot seei'n us.

Durno lets oot a relieved puff o' air, hand at his hairt. 'That wis a close een.'

Too bloody close for my likin. Were nae exactly flavour o' the month wi the local Constabulary, an theres nae tellin foo Sgt. McIvor wid react if he found us up a closie wi Gibbie's Donkey.

'I'm telli'n yi' I warn 'im, creepin up the closie tae check that they hiv gone 'If Gary isnae back in the next five minutes were phonin Jimmy tae come and collect her.'

Jist wi that Gary's Taxi pulls up at the kerb wi a fare in the front seat, an aul wifie wi a bemused look on her face, waatchin me nip roon tae the driver's side as Gary hands a packet o' Polos oot the windae tae me, an I jist catch her sayin...*Is that a Donkey oot there?...* as Gary pulls awa an cruises on up the road.

'Here we go then.' I open the Polos an hud een oot tae her. Lu-Lu steps forward, gently slurpin it oot o' my han, crunchin it doon and lookin for mair.

Durno waves me back oot o' the closie. 'Go and try her fae oot on the pavement.'

I step oot o' the closie and she trots aifter me athoot ony encouragement.

'Jeez, she's mad for that Polos, is she?'

'Aye, go on and gie her anither een' Durno says 'Then we'll jist turn an waalk awa, see if she follows us.'

I gie her anither Polo an we baith turn and waalk awa. Sure enough she is up the pavement ahin us an we slow doon at the corner, tricin her roon wi the sweeties, on up King Street towards the new bungalows on the edge o' toon, bit yi canna go herdin a Donkey through the toon athoot attractin some attention. Cars slow doon as they pass by, some o' them comin back for a second look, tootin their horns, their passangers wavin an shoutin oot the windaes at us. Na that it bothers Lu-Lu. She's lovin the attention, swankin up the road like she's jist won the Grand National, bit it's nae that far, an fan we get her hame tae Jimmy's it looks like theres a wee party gaun on, music playin an shaddas movin ahin the blinds.

'Go on then' I urge. 'Up tae the door. Yi niver know, Amanda micht answer it and you can play the hero.'

'Aye, very funny.'

'Oh Durno' I swoon 'You have rescued my Sister's Donkey. How I can I ever repay you?'

He shoots me the finger an heeds up the pathie, bit he's nae half wy there fan the lobby light comes on an the front door opens.

'Far his she been noo?' Jimmy gies a weary sigh an steps doon the pathie towards us. 'I thoct I'd sorted that bloody gate.'

'We found her doon in North Street Jimmy.' Durno tells 'im.

Lu -Lu gies a wee stamp an whinny o' greetin fan she spots Jimmy an he's ower fussin an clappin at her. 'Thanks for takin her hame boys. Yi's I'll hiv tae come in for a Dram look. The Quines are jist haein a wee soiree afore they ging oot.' He waves a han towards the side o' the hoose. 'An if een o' yi wid open that side gate I'll tak her roon an oot the back.'

Durno steps roon the side o' the hoose, Jimmy herdin Lu-Lu aifter 'im, an fa appears at the door bit Amanda, aa legs and lang blonde hair, dressed mair for an evenin oot in Magaluff than a caal November night in Strathbogie.

'Oh it's you is it...Fits gaun on?'

'Lu-Lu his escaped again' I tell her 'We found her doon in North Street.'

'Is that the Taxi?' somebody shouts fae the lobby.

'No' Amanda shouts back ower her shooder 'It's the ither half o' dumb and dumber.' She steps outside for a look. 'I suppose he's here an aa is he?'

Right on cue Durno and Jimmy step back roon the corner. 'Come on in for a drink loons' Jimmy encourages, steppin back in the door.

Some o' Amanda's pals crowd intae the lobby ahin her, an my hairt gies a wee loup fan I spot her cousin Nell smilin oot at me fae the doorstep.

'Weel yi heard ma Da' Amanda says, wavin us inside. 'Yi's hid better come in for a drink.'

Durno disnae need tae be asked twice, following Amanda in the door as Nell steps ootside. She hisnae been ower this wy for a while, some boyfriend ower in Keith keepin her close tae hame. Nae that it stopped us gettin better acquainted the last time she wis here. It wis a party roon in Gail Patterson's an I wis turnin on the charm an things were gaun weel afore a few o' the Young team turned up at the door an it aa kicked aff. Durno wis weel tae the fore as usual an there wis nithin for it bit tae wade in alongside 'im, bit it fairly pit a damper on things an I hivnae seen her since.

She waalks doon the pathie towards me, a great mane o' hair the colour o' October leaves tumblin at her shooders. 'Aa right Charlie?'

Amanda turns back on the doorstep afore I can answer. 'Gies a shout if the Taxi comes Nell?'

'I think I'll jist waalk doon.'

Amanda gies her a wee look, shrugs her shooders an steps inside.

'Far are yi's gaun?' I ask.

'Doon tae the Fitba Club...Bit I wis thinkin on lookin in past Gail's...'

She pushes her hair aff her face, her fathomless green eyes blinkin oot me, like thon Cat fae ower the dyke that sometimes sits oot in oor backie.

'...Yi wint tae waalk doon wi me?'

I look across at Durno, waitin expectantly on the doorstep. 'I'm awa doon tae Gail's...I'll sort yi oot and yi can square me up aifter.'

'Aye well, dinna keep 'im up ower late' he tells Nell 'We hiv an early start the morn.'

Nell jist shaks her heed at 'im an waves me on doon the road. 'Fit are yi's up tae the morn then?.. Or should I nae ask?'

' No, it's aa straight and above board...Were gaun ower tae Mulben tae a Roup.'

'Well, yi heard Durno' she laughs, slippin her han intae mine 'I'll try an nae keep yi up ower late.'

She leads me doon the road, a drizzly mist hingin ower the parks on the edge o' the toon an shimmerin roon the streetlights, baith o' us laughi'n as Lu-Lu lets oot an ill naiturt bray at her re-capture and return hame, her indignation ringin roon the quiet cul-de-sac.