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# turtle

gary bryson

  
ALLEN & UNWIN

ON A WARM, SUNNY MORNING in the summer of 1976, I took a last big breath and slipped gently under the folding waters of the Firth of Clyde, one arm waving goodbye to my family who were watching from the shore, my mother's cries flat and distant and then lost forever in the gurgling darkness. Over and over, down and down, no turning back. It was my eighteenth birthday.

That was my curse, and that's how it was, though I don't expect you to believe it, not a word. Nor do I expect you to believe that I swam like a turtle through all the oceans of the earth, or that I held my breath forever, just as I'd been taught to do, or that it was thirty-two years before I broke the

surface, and when I did the blinding foam and the clear, clean air was like a mother's kiss to a lost child found.

I drowned that sunny summer's day, just as the curse predicted. I drowned and I didn't drown, lost to one life and tumbling, turning, gasping for breath in the next. That's how it was, I swear to God.

*Aye, that's how it wis, right enough.  
Straight doon tae the bottom an  
goodbye reality,  
don't bother wi the postcard.  
But Christ on a bike, wee man,  
ah never meant ye tae stay there furever.*

# 1

THAT LOOK ON HER FACE, like the world was melting.

Mum had told me to keep an eye on my baby sister while she was in the butcher's. But I took the brake off the pram, just playing with it, and it rolled off the edge of the pavement and tipped onto the road, showering the baby with the morning's shopping, the screams bringing Mum running from the shop. She didn't say a word, just gave me that look before she picked the baby up and righted the pram. By the time we arrived home I'd forgotten all about it, but as soon as we were in the door, she turned and skelped me hard across the back of my bare leg. Then again. Hard skelps, with the palm of her hand. She was shouting, too, her face squeezed with the effort, her dark hair coming loose around it. That's what I remember, the wild hair and the hate in her face, like she

didn't know how to stop. The rest of the day is lost to me now, just a feeling of being pushed away, maybe something worse. I suppose I deserved it.

I could say that it was all different. That my mother loved me anyway, that she found in me some qualities that made her proud. But the truth is—as the truth always is—sleek and jagged-mouthed, turning and squirming and ripping at your fingers as you try to grasp it. Why was Mum sick in bed all the time and why was Dad never there, and why was I, alone among my siblings, cursed to die by drowning? And why would you be interested anyway? Maybe you should just mind your own bloody business and leave me to struggle with this on my own. No, don't go away. Not yet. There are other questions. Like why did my brother have all his fingers broken, one by one, so that he was never quite the same again? And why is Joe Kelso dead and his killer never found? And why did Anna McColl smile at me at 4.18 on the afternoon of Tuesday, the ninth of October, 1975?

Anna McColl was in my class at school and I thought for a long time that she thought I was a wanker, like I thought everyone else thought. She spent a lot of time not looking. Not looking at the teacher, not looking at the blackboard and not looking at me. Especially not looking at me. Despite that, it has to be said, she was a looker. Dark hair and big brown eyes are what I remember now but I'm sure I could make up more; the way she wore her clothes, the creases around her eyes when she laughed, her kiss, the smell of her skin.

And I remember this: She had a habit of eating her hair while she sat, abstracted, at her desk. She would chew on

the ends and then blow on the wet bits. I watched her do it, hoping to catch her eye. But she wouldn't look.

Where exactly are they, these two kids, so close together and so far apart? I can tell you that. Glasgow, a run-down school in the suburbs. It's raining. It's always raining. At least that's how I remember it. Bleak, and cold, and always raining, though maybe I'd think differently if I still lived there. The truth is, I'm not really Scottish anymore. Only when I want to be. Sometimes I'm Italian and sometimes Australian. It's confusing, but I've made what I can of it. In 1975 I was Scottish, though known as 'the wop' because of my Tally surname. Being called 'the wop' was not a term of endearment on the part of my schoolmates. It was vicious, persecutory; a territory fought over with fists and feet and which I always lost to the plook-faced playground imperialists.

A quick backflipper, because the truth is too close for comfort. Anna McColl *never looked at anyone*, but she smiled at me. Can I hide behind that? Yes I can, and I will. The exact time and date is noted in my diary for the year 1975, under the heading *Tuesday October 9*. In scrawled handwriting it says: *4.18 pm. Anna McColl smiled at me.*

The diary is a cheap blue one from school. It's battered and faded and some of the pages have fallen out. It's the first time I've laid eyes on that diary for over thirty years and, let me tell you, I'm in shock. I'm dizzy and my stomach is in knots and I have to lie on the floor and curl up into a ball. *Anna McColl smiled at me.* As I read the words I can feel my eyes heavy with the tears that, until this minute, have failed to come. I can hear the clamour of schoolkids at the bus stop, sense their

slow-motion movement around me; I can see her smile and I can remember my answering, too-big grin.

Some background . . .

My name is Donald Lachlan Pinelli, as a boy known variously as Smelly Pinelli, Pin-head, or, as already mentioned, the wop. My brother—my *half*-brother, let's get this right—his name is Kenny Drummond. Killer Kenny, football forward, lover boy, rock star, though I called him Mr Disco, because he could never sit still for a minute, and because he was a right doolie. He loved to dance and show off and tell everyone how good he was at everything. The galling thing is, he *was* good, the bastard, and I hated him for it. I hated my sister too, but more about her later.

Let me tell you about Mum. She was a Glasgow girl from the Maryhill tenements. She lost her father to the drink when she was only three years old, and her two brothers eleven years later in the war. My granny scraped by, taking in other people's washing, but after her brothers went off to the fighting Mum had to leave school and go out to work too. She found work as a fishmonger, which was a skill you had to learn, not just some *bide-your-time-until-you're-married* job in a factory or behind a counter at Lewis'. She was determined to better herself. But though she would never admit it, she nursed a bitterness inside towards the father who had abandoned her and the brothers who had left home so easily, laughing in the face of death. Maybe that was the root of all her later problems. Or maybe not. There were other things besides abandonment. Worse things.

At the age of nineteen she married William Drummond, a riveter, who took her to live in Govan. He worked on the big ships that they used to build on the Clyde in the days when the city was black with old soot. The war had been over for four years, but people were poor and tired and miserable, waiting and grieving for the men who weren't coming back. The grey streets and the rain and the bitter winters and the price of coal and the shortages. Rationing was still on and there was so much you needed that you couldn't get and so much yearning for something better. Yet Mum insisted that she and Drummond were blissfully happy for nearly three years.

*We were that happy, son. Blissfully happy. Bill wis sich a good man. Wid ye like a wee biscuit?*

And maybe they were happy. But just before their third wedding anniversary she was abandoned once again when Drummond the riveter died in a fishing accident near Millport, where the family was on holiday for the Glasgow Fair. He and his brother Josie had gone off that morning in a rented dinghy. The day had been mild enough with a slight swell and a haze out to sea that hurt your eyes to look at, but which held the promise of a glimpse of sun. None of the many passing boats—fishing trawlers bringing home their catch, coal luggers, tugs, pleasure craft—had spotted a dinghy in trouble, but the two men were never seen again. It happens sometimes. I can see Bill Drummond standing at the pointy end, taking a pish over the side of the boat. A sudden movement, a man overboard, an attempted rescue. Then, when the ripples have passed, nothing. The sea's big enough

to keep a secret. It's a place of shadows fluttering and flitting, stinging and biting, eyes that never close, feelers and tentacles waiting under rocks and bits of old shipwrecks, cold mouths feeding on dead sailors and tasty morsels from the sewers of the city. The sea hides, and the sea reveals. Believe me, I know all about it. The best way to survive is to have your own big, comfy shell to curl up in, hard enough to resist whatever the next tide brings in.

The dinghy was found washed up on the beach near Fairlie, on the Ayreshire coast. Drummond's cap was in it and though it was wet and the blue ink had run, you could still read the inscription *Love from Trixie* on the label. That was Mum's name: Trixie. Her maiden name was McDuff. She clung to the cap and waited for her husband, but though she grieved and pined and yearned and felt her life empty out like an old bucket of slops, even all this wasn't enough to make her who she was. There was more still: while Drummond was newly missing but not yet pronounced dead, Trixie discovered she was pregnant. And, even before her first husband buggered off to the ocean deep, never to be seen again, there was the Tragedy of Auld Smith the Fishmonger, and a curse that couldn't be lifted; Trixie's transition from happy, carefree, gorgeous girl—*ye could be a model, so ye could*—to nervous-breakdown-prone housewife, clairvoyant, and prime candidate for Worst Mother of the Century, really began, as she tells it, with a box of rotten fish. But we'll get to that in a bit. First things first.

Drummond the riveter was off swimming with the fishes and Trixie clung to his old cloth cap and she waited while her

belly swelled and she felt the future Mr Disco taking shape inside her. Twisting and jiving and doing the hokey-pokey. And probably the mashed potato, too. Every now and then he gave her a kick, demonstrating his future prowess on the soccer field and his special knack for never letting anyone forget he was around. Mum moved back to Granny McDuff's and that's where the dancing fiend was born, minus the midwife because she was late, and the doctor because he was drunk. Granny McDuff put on her best scowl, rolled up her sleeves and got handy with hot water and towels. When it was over, she took one look at my brother and fell in love with the wee bugger and it was her, in the end, that brought him up.

By that time Drummond had been all but forgotten. 'Death by misadventure' was pronounced while Trixie was still pregnant, and as soon as my brother was out of her belly, she set about tidying up that part of her life. She put away Drummond's old cloth cap, left the baby with Granny Mac, and headed for the dancin'. In the dim light filled with hope and strangers, and to the music of the Ed Farrow Dance Band playing 'Mean to Me', she met my dad. *He danced like an angel.*

His name was—is—Carlo Pinelli. At the time they met he still lived with his parents and worked in his father's cafe, dreaming up ways to make big-time money, not all of them legal. But Trixie didn't know that then. To her, he was dark and handsome and exotic, with an air of mystery, and he danced like a man smiled on by the gods. As they danced he held her in his gaze and she melted, she said, like chocolate, into his strong arms. Something like that. *Ah went aw runny*

*inside, son, and ah thought, this is the wan. This is the man fur me. How about a wee sandwich?*

The deal was clinched when Trixie discovered that Carlo had his own car. They got married a year later. Carlo's dad, whom everyone called Pa, wasn't at the wedding, though Nonna was, and there's a picture still of the three of them and Granny McDuff. They're all looking stiffly at the camera, the older women flaunting feathery things over dark coats and round hats, Trixie in a white wedding dress (Nonna was not happy about *that*), and my dad in a dark suit, smiling and frowning at the same time.

What can we say about this old photo? Well, first and foremost, it's what you might call prescient. And if that sounds like a wanky thing to say, here's more. It reflects the essentially unbalanced nature of Carlo's character—his uneven smile, one side of his mouth up, one side down, so that you don't know whether he's happy or sad. Crooked, you might say. That mix of amusement and exasperation I came to know so well. There's a bulge in his jacket that may well be a gun.

And Trixie. You can already see what will become, in time, a recurring theme of her personality—namely, the deep depression which will again and again descend upon her, locust-like, eating away at her vitality, poisoning her dreams. She's smiling her model smile, her forties-style glamour girl, wide-mouthed, big toothy smile; the one you put on when you're in trouble, when you're drowning in a sea far deadlier than the one that took Bill Drummond. Her hands clutch a posy of flowers which have already begun to wilt.

And the oldies? Granny McDuff is scowling. True to form, she wanted nothing to do with the wop family that Trixie had foisted on her. *The best thing about Carlo, she would say, is that he isn't German, though no far off it. And didn't they Tallies fight on the same side durin the war? Ah'm tellin ye, girl, they wir aw fearties, so they wir. They've nae fight in them. When times get bad he'll be nae bloody use tae ye at all. You mark ma words, ye'll be sorry so ye will. And that wee yin'll be sorry too.*

She wasn't referring to me, of course, but to Mr Disco, just over two years old by then, and present in the photo as an unseen lock of hair that Trixie hid in her bodice for luck.

And Nonna? For her part, Nonna kept silent. You can see the silence in her eyes in the photo. And that's all we need to say about her for the moment.

A fractured family; a curse that missed its due date but that made itself felt in other ways for thirty years and more; a turtle that swam through oceans real and imagined, and that held its breath for an eternity. That's about it. And Anna McColl, let's not forget her, because while all these ingredients were being stewed together slowly, but just before the lid blew off the cooking pot for good, she smiled at me.

How did a confused and hapless Italo-Scot cope with being smiled at that autumn day by the girl of his dreams? Sometimes, despite yourself, you take a chance. We were standing at the bus stop, kids milling about, cries and yelps as someone's schoolbag sailed onto the road and into the traffic. It wasn't mine this time. I turned to see who the victim was and Anna was standing there, just behind me. She looked at me

and she smiled and the sun came out and sparks went off in my head—then I started to worry that my fly was undone and I wanted to check but I couldn't because I wanted those eyes to drink me in forever. So I smiled back. Not the kind of tight-mouthed pretend smile that would have said what I was really thinking—You're taking the pish, aren't you?—but a real shiny-toothed oh-my-gosh smile that said, Hi, I'm so glad you noticed me, let's go and get married right away and live in a room and kitchen and have ten kids. She looked away. I stood there thinking up opening lines which remained unsaid until the bus came and she got on it but I didn't because it was full.

That's pretty near the truth, for me. As for Joe Kelso being dead and my brother having his fingers broken, I just made that up to get you reading this far, but now that you're here I can tell you that there's more to the story of Anna McColl than a stupid grin and a receding bus. I can tell you that I didn't see her again for another thirty-two years. I can also tell you that when I stood bereft at the bus stop under that bleak Scottish sky I noticed that my fly *was* actually open. And that seems to me to be the problem with life: that your greatest fears are probably going to be realised and that you have to be so, so brave just to do the most ordinary things, like smile at someone without looking like an eejit.

*Hello? Is there embdy in there?*

*Knock wance fur yes an twice  
fur naw.*

*An three bloody times*

*if ye came up the Clyde in a wheelbarra.*