

The Burrymen War

A Novel by
Brendan Gisby

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Prologue

No-one knows for sure when or why the Burryman ceremony in South Queensferry began, although many say it celebrates the granting to the town of Royal Burgh status by James VI in 1588.

This account of it was penned by the writer, W. W. Fyffe, in 1865: “On the day preceding the Queensferry Fair, the Burry Man who requires to be either a stout man or robust lad, as weakly persons, like the man in complete steel who annually sacrifices his life to the Lord Mayors Show in London, have been known to faint under the heat and fatigue of the dressing, is indued in his flannels; face, arms, and legs, body all being covered, so as nearly to resemble a man in chain amour, from the adhesion of the burrs; and the head, as well as the tops of the staves grasped with extended arms, being beautifully dressed with flowers; whilst the victim, thus accoutered, is led from door to door by two attendants who likewise assist in holding up his arms by grasping the staves. At every door in succession, a shout is raised, and the inhabitants, severally come forth, bestow there kindly greetings and donatives of money on the Burry Man who in this way collects, we believe, considerable sums of money to be eventually divided and spent at the Fair by the youth associated in this exploit.”

Whatever its origins, the ceremony was held every year for hundreds of years until it was suspended by the authorities after the gruesome and mysterious death of a participant in the 1990 ceremony. The following is the story of the events surrounding that death.

Chapter One

Return to the Battleground

I didn't know what force had drawn me to that side of the street and had then compelled me to walk through the latched-back door. Without warning, without any conscious decision, I had traded the brightness of the afternoon for the gloom of the Ferry Arms public bar. I had vowed never to set foot in that place again, but suddenly there I was, standing slap-bang in the enemy heartland – and the scene of my nightmares for the last twenty years.

Only moments before, I had slipped away from the wake going on in my old haunt, the Forth Bridges bar. Having begun quietly and solemnly, the wake was growing more boisterous by the minute. But it wasn't so much the noise and the heat in there that had made me feel uncomfortable. Nor was it that sea of unfamiliar faces, among them Muldy's third and latest wife, the grown-up children from that and his previous marriages, and the partners of those children; all strangers to me. No, what had unsettled me most were the images smirking down at me from the walls of the bar.

Someone had decided to plaster the walls with photographs of Muldy. There were scores of them, spanning the six decades of Muldy's life from when he was a wee boy in short trousers right up to what must have been very recently, when he looked old and yellow and emaciated. And in every one of those photographs, there was that cocky grin of his; Muldy's signature grin. It was all around me, mocking me wherever I looked and

causing all sorts of feelings to rise within me; feelings of anger and sadness and regret. Wanting to escape the confusion of emotions for a while, I had gone for a walk, but inexplicably my footsteps had taken me straight there.

If I was looking for a calm spot in which to sort out my thoughts and memories of Muldy, I had certainly found one in the Ferry Arms. There were only two customers in the bar: two old men standing at the counter, neither of whom I recognised. Surprisingly, I didn't feel threatened at all; in fact, the place seemed almost welcoming – comforting, even.

I bought a pint and took a seat at a table to the side of the entrance, from where I had a clear view of the full length of the bar. I found myself staring at the black resin floor in front of the counter. Was it my imagination or was the floor scarred there in the centre? I wondered whether the scars had been made by the weapons which appeared as if from nowhere that night so long ago – Beastie's hatchet, maybe, or the psycho's machete.

My stare moved up to the enormous, gilt-framed mirror, which took up most of the wall opposite the counter and which I'm certain wasn't hanging there that night. I began to wonder again. What if I went up to the mirror right now and peered behind it? Would the blood splashes from the carnage still be there?

Then the memories came rushing at me. I could hear shouts and taunts coming from the far end of the bar and I could make out the ghostly shapes of the men who were uttering them. The bad guys, the nutters, were up at that end. Us good guys, the heroes, were down here. The battleground was in between. And a bleeding body was stretched out in the middle of it. I was trying to remember what the face on the body looked like when it and the other shapes and the sounds all vanished abruptly, and I was back in the hushed bar watching Lenny, the Hippy, slouch towards me with a pint in his hand.

As far back as I could remember, Lenny always slouched like that, his shoulders stooped, the thumb of his left hand hooked over the side

pocket of his jeans.

‘So how’s young Danny Boy doin’, eh?’ he asked as he slumped into the chair next to me.

‘Fine, thanks, Lenny,’ I grinned. ‘But no’ so young now.’

‘Aye,’ he sighed. ‘I suppose none o’ us is gettin’ any younger, Dan.’

He took a long swig from his pint glass, giving me the chance to look him over. Although he didn’t appear to have aged much, I’m pretty sure his nose had grown bigger and redder and more pitted – the effect of his constant boozing, no doubt. Other than that, he looked exactly the same as when I last saw him: the same long blond hair and Zapata moustache, the same denim jacket and baseball boots; it was an appearance that had remained stuck in the late Sixties.

‘I wis on ma way tae the Forth an’ saw you nippin’ in here,’ he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘Thought I’d drop in fur a wee blether.’

‘I’ve jist come fae there. It wis gettin’ too noisy fur me. You ken whit Muldy’s relatives are like...’

‘Oh, aye. I’ll no’ be stayin’ long there myself. Gettin’ too fuckin’ auld for it, my man.’

I smiled in response. I knew he was lying. He’d spend the rest of the afternoon and all night in the Forth. Where there was booze flowing, the Hippy would be there. Someone had told me he had married again and fathered another couple of children; a new family for him to go home to – but not before shutting time.

‘Anyways, how’s Violet an’ the kids?’ he continued, as if he was reading my mind. ‘Yous still livin’ in Fife? I’ve ayways said that gein’ they Fifers electricity wis bad enough, but buildin’ bridges tae let them cross ower tae civilisation – that wis a fatal mistake.’

He chuckled at his own joke and took another swig of his pint. I had heard him say those words a hundred times before, so I just smiled again, but I could feel those old frustrations of mine returning.

‘Tell you what, Lenny,’ I began, probably a lot more forcibly than I

had intended, ‘us movin’ ower tae Dunfermline and stayin’ wi’ Vi’s Mum an’ Dad wis the best thing we ever did. We’ve got oor ain hoose noo, both the kids are at Uni an’ I’ve got a great job, one that I really like – it’s in computers, wid ye believe?’

‘I’ve got a job as well,’ interrupted Lenny, ‘though I cannae say I like it very much. The building site work dried up years ago, so I work for the Cooncil noo. I’m a Mobile Cleansing Operative, don’t you know?’

‘A whit?’

‘I sweep the fuckin’ streets,’ he laughed. ‘But it means I can work outside. An’ I see people a’ the time.

‘Whit the fuck, man, it’s a job, eh?’ he added, throwing up his arms and shrugging in that hippy way of his.

I didn’t respond. I was more interested in making my point.

‘The thing is, Lenny, if we hadnae moved tae Fife, if we hadnae left this bigoted shit-hole o’ a toon, we wid’ve sunk – sunk without fuckin’ trace.’

There was a definite smirk on Lenny’s face. ‘Hey, man, the Ferry’s no’ that bad,’ he laughed.

‘Maybe no’ fur you, Lenny,’ I retorted quickly, conscious that my voice was growing louder, ‘but it wis fur me. How wid you like it if you were called Paki Boy every day o’ your life? How wid you like it if snotty-nosed little kids came up tae you in the street ev’ry day, shoutin’: *Whit time is it, mister? Is it half-caste eight yet?* And then tae pit the tin lid on it there’s whit that other bunch o’ bigoted bastards did tae wee Billy – wee, daft Billy – right here in this...’

I stopped in mid-sentence and glanced along the bar. Neither the barman nor the two old guys seemed to be taking notice of my tirade. It was only Lenny who was listening, his smirk gone now.

‘Chill oot, man,’ he said weakly. ‘I hear whit you’re sayin’.’

In the silence that followed, we both concentrated on drinking our pints. I remembered having had a similar conversation with Lenny the last time we sat down together, but that was twenty years before and it was

right after another funeral, one that should never have been needed. I remembered also the reason for my reluctant return to the Ferry that day.

‘I never knew Muldy wis dyin’,’ I said eventually. ‘I only heard a couple o’ days ago that he wis deid.’

‘Yeah, well, he wis diagnosed months ago. He knew it wis terminal, but he didnae want tae broadcast the fact. He wis wastin’ away, lookin’ like a fuckin’ skeleton, man. He didnae want folk tae see him like that. His pride, you ken.’

‘Right,’ I nodded. ‘So did you see much o’ him afore...?’

‘Och, aye, he wis jist the usual Muldy. Full o’ plans an’ schemes, things he wanted tae dae afore he died. An’ ev’rybody runnin’ efter him, includin’ me. They were keepin’ a bed fur him in the hospice, but he insisted on stayin’ at hame. He didnae want tae behave like an invalid. He wanted tae brave it oot. Like I said, the usual Muldy.’

‘The end came really quick, though. He developed some kind o’ infection an’ had tae be wheeled intae the Western General. A day later, that wis it – broon breid. Which wis jist as well, I suppose, cos he wis puttin’ a lot o’ pressure no’ jist on hisself, but on all the folk roond him.’

I nodded again. It wasn’t hard to imagine Muldy clinging stubbornly to normality.

I couldn’t think of anything else to ask. ‘Courageous tae the end, then?’ was all I managed.

‘Yep,’ was all Lenny replied.

There was another silence, during which I tried to recall some of the good times the three of us had together.

‘There’s a load o’ pictures o’ him up on the walls o’ the Forth,’ I said. ‘Some o’ them go back years. There’s one in particular I keep thinkin’ aboot. He’s in they camouflage fatigues an’ the big Army boots he wis always wearin’, and he’s standin’ tae attention and salutin’, wi’ that rusty, auld bucket o’ a jeep o’ his in the background. Lookin’ every bit the regular soldier.’

‘Even though he had been in the Army fur only three fuckin’

months. And had been dishonourably discharged, fur fuck's sake!

We both laughed.

'Aye, I can remember that old jeep, right enough,' declared a more animated Lenny. 'D'you mind the time we loaded it up wi' the Christmas trees we cut doon on the Hopetoun estate? An' then went roond the Crossroads sellin' the trees tae people at their doors? That wis some scam, eh? Netted us a few bob there.'

'I remember nearly shittin' maself when the pigs caught up wi' us, that's whit I remember, pal.'

'Aye, but a' the trees had been sold by then, so there wis nae evidence.'

'Except for the thousands o' pine needles coverin' us an' the jeep, which the stupid fuckers missed!'

We laughed again, more loudly this time. There were tears rolling down our cheeks.

Wiping his eyes, Lenny chuckled, 'Aye, I suppose Muldy wis always schemin', plannin' his wee scams. Some o' them were funny, but others were downright fuckin' dangerous. Like that time we broke intae Alan Walker's hoose tae steal his stash. Then the big psycho fucker came hame early, an' we hud tae hide fur 'oors under his kitchen table, a' huddled thegither an' shakin' like a leaf. Christ, we could've been murdered that night.'

'Yeah, being serious, Lenny, that's whit I remember maist aboot Muldy. Him ayways gettin' us intae scrapes wi' his hare-brained schemes. An' that last yin, the Burryman shit, wis the one that did it fur me an' this fuckin' toon.'

Lenny drained his pint. He looked pensive, as if he was choosing his words carefully.

'That Burryman thing has ayways perplexed me, Dan,' he said at length. 'It started off as a guid laugh, a way o' pickin' up a few bucks an' gettin' oor ain back, but it turned intae tribal fuckin' warfare. Fur as long as I live, I'll never be able tae fathom why.'

‘Anyways, ma man,’ he continued quickly, ‘I’m gaspin’ fur a smoke afore I go tae the Forth. Are you comin’ fur yin? I’ve got a wee bit o’ weed on me. We could nip doon the shore an’ share a spliff, if you like.’

‘Naw, no’ for me, thanks, Lenny. I gave up tobacco – and weed – a long time ago. I fancy another pint here. I’ll catch up wi’ you along there.’

‘Okay, man. Catch you there.’ Lenny gave me a lazy wave from the door, then he slouched out into the sunshine.

I felt guilty for not going with him, but I wanted to savour the quiet of the Ferry Arms for a bit longer. Besides that, my memories of what had occurred there were stirring again, and it was time I had a long, hard look at them.

Chapter Two

Rumblings of War

When Lenny had gone, I glanced along the bar again. The two old guys who had been standing at the counter were now sitting at a table under that big, gilt-framed mirror. They were still the only other customers in the place.

I bought another pint and returned to the same seat. I was pondering what Lenny had said about the prank ending so badly. What was it? *Fur as long as I live, I'll never be able tae fathom why.* That was typical Lenny – always sitting on the fence, always taking that laid-back, hippy attitude to things. I reckoned he never really understood what went down that night because he never realised – and still didn't, obviously – how bad the Ferry was.

That was because Lenny wasn't like the rest of us, I reasoned. He wasn't a Catholic for a start, so he never experienced the religious bigotry that was seething away just under the surface. When he heard us being called *dirty Papes* or *Fenian bastards*, he probably thought it was just some good-natured banter about football teams. But it wasn't.

And, sure as hell, wee Lenny wasn't remotely like me. He would never have comprehended the prejudice – the full-on, vicious, poisonous, in-your-face kind of prejudice – that the town could mete out on the likes of me. I was the son of a local woman and a man I never met. My father was a foreigner who left before I was born. He was a coloured man, a Hindu from Southern India, so the Ferry morons called him a Paki, my

mother a whore and me, my brother and sister the Ferry Half-Breeds. Our surname was Jaffrey – and we were Roman Catholics to boot.

So, yeah, I asked myself, what chance did we have in that fucking dump? My twin brother, Timmy, was killed before his tenth birthday in an accident that would never have happened if my mother had been at home looking after us just for once. Then Livia, my big sis, fucked off to London when she was fifteen and was never heard of again. And me? Well, I just sort of survived, didn't I? Hardly ever went to school. Always in trouble with the pigs. Even after I got married to Vi and supposedly settled down, I was still on the make most of the time. That's who I was – Dan Jaffrey, the wide guy, the waster, the no-fucking-hoper...

Thinking of myself like that and how low my place in the Ferry had been back then, I supposed it was little wonder that on the day the Burrymen saga began I was skint, jobless, with no qualifications and hanging about my favourite bar with the two reprobates I called my best friends.

That was in April, 1990. I remembered it was a midweek evening, quite early on. I had just turned the big three zero and was feeling pretty sorry for myself. Both Muldy and Lenny were also out of work at the time and as skint and fed up as me. Although they were about ten years older, they had befriended me, the loner waif, a long time before, and I had stuck with them ever since. All three of us had families, but we probably spent more time in each other's company in the Forth than with our wives and kids at home.

We had just sat down with our pints at our favourite table directly across from the counter when Muldy made the fatal announcement.

'Listen up, troops,' he called out to the bar in that fake Sergeant-Major voice of his.

He stood up, saluted, twirled the ends of that daft, wee moustache he wore at the time and continued, 'I've just been reading in this here local rag called *The Journal & Gazette* that nominations are now invited for the

holder of the honourable and prestigious post of Burryman in this year's Ferry Fair.'

He paused to pick up and wave the folded newspaper he had been carrying about with him.

'I should like to inform present company that I intend to nominate my good self for said post. Gentlemen, do I have your support in this venture?'

Then he saluted again, sat down and awaited a response.

In addition to Lenny and me on either side of him, the *present company* whom Muldy had addressed consisted of only four people: one behind the counter and three sitting on barstools in front of it.

Charlie McNulty was the one behind the counter, but strictly speaking he wasn't a barman. He was standing in for his girlfriend, Madge, who ran the Forth and who had nipped out for a wee while, probably to get her tea. You could tell from the dirty overalls and the oily hands that, as usual, Charlie had come straight to the place from his work. The state of him never used to bother us, mind you, just as long as he could pull the pints.

'Go on yerself, Muldy,' cried Charlie. 'It's a fuckin' brilliant idea – if ye're willin' tae take the pain, that is. I wis just sayin' tae Madge the other day that it's aboot time the Forth had its ain Burryman. For as long as I can remember it's ayways been wan o' they cunts fae along the road. I'm pretty sure Madge'll want tae sponsor you.'

Charlie wasn't your refined type, that was for sure. There again, none of us in that place could ever have been described as refined. He had been in the same class as me at school. In fact, he had been one of the pack of jackals who used to taunt Timmy and me about being Pakis. I had forgiven him for that a long time before, though. He was living with Madge at the time. I never knew what the attraction was there. Madge was a good few years older than him and looked like she had been round the block a few times. But what the fuck: *each to his own* was my motto.

Anyway, the three guys at the counter had swivelled round to face

Muldy by now. Peanuts was the first of them to speak. His real name was Davy Schultz; hence the nickname.

‘Ye’ve definitely got ma vote there, Muldy, man,’ he pronounced.

Sitting next to Peanuts was Steve Beaston, who was better known as Beastie.

‘And mine,’ growled Beastie.

Now, you would never have dared say this to their faces, but Beastie and Peanuts were like an old, married couple – two pals who had aged together, were never out of each other’s sight and basically always came in a pair. They were ex-bikers, by which I mean real, hard-as-fuck ex-Hell’s Angels bikers, with the scars from old stab wounds to prove it. Both of them were well into their forties then. They still wore their hair and their beards long, but they had grown as broad as they were tall, so, like their bikes, their leather jackets with the death head logo on the back had been put into retirement years ago. Don’t get me wrong, mind: as far as I was concerned, all the girth on them, all the weight they carried, was pure fucking muscle. Those guys were two grizzly bears you did not want to tangle with.

‘The ’hing is, though, Muldy,’ Beastie continued, sounding as husky as ever, ‘you’re gonnae huv some competition there. I heard fae that blabber-mooth cunt, Joey Bryant, that Ian Webb has his name doon fur the Burryman this year...’

‘Ian fuckin’ Webb? Spinner?’ interrupted Charlie. ‘That Bluenose wanker? I told ye it wis always they Ferry Arms cunts!’

‘Aye, that’s right, Muldy,’ said Peanuts, whose voice was probably an octave higher than Beastie’s. ‘Joey Bryant’s been braggin’ that him an’ Mackie are gonnae be the... the whit the fuck d’you call them?... ye ken, the guys whae haud up the Burryman’s airms...’

‘Attendants?’

‘Aye, the attendants,’ repeated Peanuts. Then he nodded to the third person at the counter. ‘Thanks fur that, Wheels.’

Wheels sat a few barstools along from Beastie and Peanuts, which

was not surprising, because most people used to leave a bit of space between themselves and him. He was a big, wild-eyed, shambling sort of guy. I never knew his proper name, but I did know he was called Wheels as a result of his love for motors. In fact, motors were his life – literally. He worked in the garage up the back where the dairy used to be. He also lived in the garage, which was why he didn't wash very often and why there was always a space around him.

Wheels was a bit mental, even by the Ferry's standards. Before the garage, he used to sleep rough in the woods up by the Hawes Brae – or so I was told. But apart from that and the BO, he was also a very intelligent guy. He read a lot. And he seemed to know about everything. He knew about the Burryman business, anyway.

'You realise that ye'll have tae fill in an application form,' he said to Muldy, 'an' that the form has tae bear the signatures o' at least fifty local residents, who'll vouch fur your honesty an' uprightness as a citizen o' the Ferry?'

'How the fuck did you ken a' that?' Charlie asked, open-mouthed.

'I jist ken things, awright, fuck-face!'

Charlie backed away from the snarl.

'Nae offence, Wheels, pal. I was jist...'

'Aye, it says here that an application form can be obtained at the Toon Hall.' Muldy was speaking without raising his eyes from the newspaper. 'An' the completed form should be submitted tae the Ferry Fair Committee, care o' the Toon Hall, by no later than noon on the first o' June.'

Now he was looking up at Wheels.

'Disnae say anything about any signatures, but.'

'Ye'll need them. Take ma word fur it.' Wheels sounded confident about that.

'Anyways, that should be nae bother,' Charlie said eagerly. 'Madge an' me'll get the signatures fae folk comin' in here. We'll be able tae get fifty punters easy tae vouch...'

‘Fur Muldy’s honesty?’ Wheels cackled.

I have to admit we all cackled at that point, including Muldy himself. But Charlie was still keen to pursue the point.

‘Muldy’s nae saint, I’ll grant ye that,’ he stated, ‘but I’m fuckin’ sure he’s no’ any less honest than any o’ they previous Burrymen. Wis it no’ that fat, thieving bastard, Jimmy Riddle, last year, fur fuck’s sake? Aye, an’ I’m sure Muldy’s a damn fuckin’ sight mair upright than that slimy cunt, Spinner Webb.’

‘It’s no’ your honesty that’s gonnae be the problem, Muldy,’ Beastie joined in again. ‘It’s yer religion, I’m afraid, ma man.’

He paused, giving his last statement time to sink in.

‘Aye, religion. Ye see that Ferry Fair Committee whae huv tae approve your application? Ye ken who the heid bummer o’ that is, don’t ye? None other than the chief Orange bigot o’ this toon, Mister Masonic Lodge Secretary hisself, William fuckin’ McLuckie.’

‘Oh, fuck, aye! Auld Man McLuckie!’ exclaimed Peanuts.

‘And d’ye ken who Spinner Webb hings about wi’? One o’ his best fuckin’ mates? None other than darlin’ son, cunt-face Tossle McLuckie. An’ where do they a’ congregate? Yeah, you’ve got it – the Ferry fuckin’ Airms.

‘So I would say you’re jist pissin’ in the wind, ma man. Yer application disnae huv a snowball’s fuckin’ chance in hell.’

‘Aye, but it’s still maybe worth a go,’ Charlie persisted. ‘Pit the form in anyway, Muldy. Madge an’ me’ll get the signatures fur ye. Ye’ll no’ beat the bastards unless ye try.’

If Muldy felt disappointed by what Beastie had said, he didn’t show it. As jaunty as ever, he closed the conversation in the same way he had begun it – by standing up, saluting and putting on that fake voice again.

‘Thank you, Mister McNulty. Thank you, Misters Schultz and Beeston. And thank you, Mister Wheels, sir.

‘Having heard what present company has had to say, I have decided to take Mister McNulty’s advice, despite the odds being stacked

against me. Tomorrow morning, I shall procure said application form at the Town Hall and I shall return with it to this establishment to obtain the necessary signatures with the help of my good friends, Madge and Charlie. Thereafter, I shall duly submit the application and I shall report back here with the outcome.'

'Go fur it, Muldy!' shouted Charlie.

The others merely grunted their acknowledgements and swivelled back to their pints.

'Norris Mulder, over and out.'

Muldy saluted a final time and sat down to looks of incredulity from both Lenny and me. Lenny was the first to speak, shaking his head in an exasperated sort of way.

'So that's it then, Muldy, eh? Ye've suddenly discovered your sense o' civic fuckin' duty. You want tae be the Burryman. Hoo-fuckin-ray!

'Huv you any idea whit you'd be lettin' yerself in fur, ya daft twat? Covered from heid tae taes wi' jaggy burrs a' day. Walkin' fur miles. Hardly able tae eat or drink. An' no' able tae take a piss, even. You must be aff ye're fuckin' heid, ma man.'

'Aye, seems like a load o' effort fur... well, for nowt,' I chipped in.

Muldy raised a finger and grinned.

'Aha, that's where ye're wrong, young Danny Boy.'

He looked up at the counter to make sure no-one was listening. Then he lowered his head and indicated that we should bring our faces closer to his.

'Listen up here, o ye o' little faith,' he said almost in a whisper. 'Ye ken when the Burryman does his roonds an' a' they folk – youngsters an' the like – gang around wi' him carryin' they collection tins?'

'Aye,' nodded Lenny, who was also half-whispering, 'they're collectin' fur the Ferry Fair Fund or some shit like that.'

'Well, this article in *The Journal & Gazette* says that the collection tins can bring in ower a thousand quid a year. A fuckin' grand, would ye Adam an' Eve it? But it also says that years ago it wis the tradition fur the

cash tae be shared between the Burryman an' his helpers.'

Muldy paused to grin again and look at each of us in turn.

'So, ma merry men. As ye ken, I'm a' in favour o' bringin' back tradition. I got tae thinkin' that if perchance I happened tae be the next Burryman an' therefore in charge o' said collection tins, I might want the Burryman an' his friends tae retain some of the proceeds. A fifty-fifty split wi' the Ferry Fair Fund, maybe. Think about it: a pony atween us fur a day's work – wi' nae risk whatso-fuckin-ever. It wid be a steal, pardon the pun.'

He stopped to give us time to digest his latest loopy scheme.

'Sounds like it could be a goer,' was all that I was able to muster.

Lenny took a bit longer to respond, no doubt wanting to think more about the risks that might have been involved.

'I agree wi' Dan,' he said after a while. 'It's got the makings o' somethin' that could work. But I suppose ye'll be expectin' us two gades tae walk around wi' you as your – whit did Wheels cry them? – your fuckin' assistants?'

Muldy stretched out his arms and hugged us both by the shoulders.

'You got it, my amigos!' he laughed.

I took a long drink from my pint and sat back, amazed that I could remember so much so clearly. I could almost taste the vitriol that had been uttered by Charlie and Beastie that evening. And I could almost touch the hatred, so thick had the air been with it. It occurred to me that what they had said and how they had felt was pretty much normal behaviour back then. Not for the first time, I wondered what had lain at the root of that hostility. Was it religion or football? The chicken or the egg? I decided it had to be religion.

I hadn't taken much in at school, but I did learn that the religious differences in the Ferry went back hundreds of years. Like most places in Scotland, there was a Catholic minority, who were discriminated against by the Protestant majority when it came to the important things like jobs and

housing. And all the power was in the hands of the freemasons, who hated Catholics. That's what I had been taught, anyway.

I reckoned that over time the same religious hostilities became entrenched in football team allegiances, with Protestants supporting either Rangers or Hearts, and Catholics supporting either Celtic or Hibs. It may not have been historically accurate, I admitted, but I supposed that the supporters of the different teams then began to gather in different pubs. As far back as I could tell, it had been the Anchor for Hibs supporters, the Stag for Hearts supporters, the Ferry Arms for Rangers supporters and the Forth for Celtic supporters. The last two were the main ones, though, with the Proddies, the Bluenoses, the Huns in one, and the Tims, the Papes, the Mickies in the other. They were two enemy fucking camps, in fact. Except when it came to football matters, both camps co-existed in an uneasy sort of way, but the animosity was always lurking there, ready to explode, like powder kegs. None of us knew it at the time, but Muldy had just lit the fuse.