

The Bookie's Runner

Brendan Gisby

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In memory of Derry McKay.

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“He’s dressed like Frank Sinatra, like a member of the Rat Pack. He’s the bookie’s runner with the lopsided grin, but he’s destined to lose.”

Foreword

Many people have written books about their fathers. In doing so, they have set out to celebrate their fathers' heroism or achievements or fame – or even notoriety. I've written this short book about my father. He wasn't a hero. Apart from fathering seven children, six of whom are alive and kicking to this day, he didn't achieve anything noteworthy in his brief life. He wasn't famous in any way. Nor was he remotely notorious. On the contrary, he was respected and loved by all who knew him. He was an ordinary, working-class man; a gentle soul, who loved his family and toiled day and night for them.

So why did I want to write a book about him? The answer is simple. Dad was also a downtrodden man; one of life's losers. His experiences – the events that came together to destroy him – are important to me. They shaped my outlook on life. They made me who I am.

Brendan Gisby

August 2010

Chapter One

A Big Emptiness

The bus is climbing up Kirkliston Road now on its way out of the town. It has just gone past the end of our street. In a moment, it will pass the entrance to the cemetery, where Dad is buried alongside little Patricia and old Dan. In about an hour's time, it will pull up in front of St Mary's Academy in Bathgate. And so will begin the first day of a new school year and my first day in the Fourth Year.

I'm glad that I managed to get a seat on my own at the back of the bus. I can sit here quietly, staring out of the window, watching the fields roll by, the greyness of the sky above them matching how I feel this morning. I'm also relieved that no-one spoke to me at the bus stop. Just one word from any of them or the flicker of a smile or catching their eyes for only a second would have been enough to break my resolve and have me bursting into tears like a sissy. But they all knew that it was best to stay away from me, thank God.

It won't be the same when I get to St Mary's. None of my pals will know that my Dad died during the school holidays. I won't be telling them either. I'm just going to have to smile and laugh and joke along with them and get through this awful day without

breaking down. Right now, I'm on the verge of crying. There's a lump in my throat and a knot in my stomach. There's a terrible feeling of dread hanging over me; it's like a big emptiness. I miss my Dad so much. It feels like this is the worst and loneliest day of my life.

Memories of Dad, glimpses of him, are crowding into my thoughts. Some are good memories, but most are sad. They're not in any particular order either; some are from years ago, while others are much more recent. And they're all jostling for place.

Here's one of him standing at the bus stop that I've just come from. He's holding that little suitcase of his, waiting serenely for the bus that will take him into the hospital, convinced that he's only going in for tests and that he'll be back in a few days.

'Look after your mother, now,' he's saying to me, but I can't hear the words.

Here's one of him a few days later. He's lying on his hospital bed. It's the day after he won his big bet and had the first operation. There's a wry, pained grin on his face.

And here's a happier one of him when I was a lot younger. He's splashing about in the sea, wearing a pair of Mum's blue knickers and claiming to have swum out to Inchgarvie and back.

He's almost skipping along the street in the next one. There's a thick, woollen scarf wrapped around his mouth. That was the time when my sister, Mary, 'found' the money that he needed for the dentist.

He's happy and cheerful in the next one, too, pouring tea for me and my pals from school on the day the road bridge was opened.

But here's another sad one. It's just after Patricia's funeral. Dad is sliding with his back down the living room door. Now he's

sitting on the floor, erupting in big, hot tears. We were all little then. We're crying, too, and smothering him in hugs, trying to console him.

And here's a more recent one of him sitting with his head in his hands at the kitchen table. There's a frightened, hunted look in his eyes. He's just discovered that the vanity case has been broken into again and emptied of the weekend's returns. The bitch had found his new hiding place for it. The fucking bitch! Why did she have to do that to him?

I have to stop this. There are tears misting my eyes. I can hardly see out of the window now. That's the War memorial in Kirkliston out there, I think; it looks like a grey blur. I need to concentrate. I need to control the anger and bitterness that are welling up inside of me, or they'll overwhelm me and I won't last this journey. If I can use the time that's left here in the quiet of the bus to put the jumble of memories into some sort of order, perhaps I'll be able to figure out who my Dad was, where he came from and what he did in life. And perhaps then I'll be able to understand why he had to suffer and why he died like he did.

Chapter Two

The Unwanted Son

It's funny, but now that I come to think about it, I don't really know very much about Dad when he was younger. He never seemed to talk about his past life. What little I do know I've learned from Mum, and she has a habit of getting things mixed up and sometimes exaggerating or twisting them. What I am certain of is that Dad was born in England. That made him English, I suppose. I've never thought about him that way before, but being English and not Scottish didn't make him any less of a person in my eyes. He was christened with two very English names – Charles Frederick. You'd think that he would have been called Charlie or Chick or even Derrick, but for some reason he ended up being called Derry. I've never heard of anyone else with that name.

As far as I can remember, I've never met Dad's father, my grandfather. I don't even know if the man is still alive; he wasn't at Dad's funeral, that's for sure. I know that he's called Tom and that he lives in Kent – or at least he did. He used to be a sailor, I think. Mum says that he came from a long line of seafarers, who hailed originally from Norway, although she might have made that up. According to her, there's quite a mixture of blood running in our veins. There's Irish from her side, along with a bit of Spanish, or so

she claims. And there's Scottish, English and Norwegian from Dad's side. And Jewish, of course; mustn't forget that. She said once that there was some Jewish blood in Tom's family, on his mother's side, which accounted for Dad's swarthy looks and that hooked nose of his. She also said that if Hitler had managed to invade Britain, Dad would have been done for. I'm sort of sceptical about that as well. I *think* that Dad was circumcised, though. So maybe the last bit was true. It's difficult to tell with Mum and her romantic notions.

Anyway, Tom and Dad's Mum, Annie, our Nana, got divorced when Dad was still a little boy. Tom got married again and had other children. I've seen a picture of his second wife with Dad's stepsister and two stepbrothers, but I've never met any of them.

Nana left Kent and came back to the Ferry with Dad. She also remarried and had other children – my Uncle John and my Aunt Cathie – by Cherry, my granddad. I'm not sure whether it was because Cherry and her were overcrowded in their place or because Annie couldn't cope with Dad and two younger children, but Dad went to live with Annie's mother and father, his grandparents, Dan and Kate McKay. They all stayed in the Crossroads, just along the road from each other.

Dan died when I was a baby, but old Kate's still going strong, living on her own in the same house, as tough and independent as ever. She's our great-grandmother, but we call her Gran, just like Dad did. She must be well into her eighties now, yet she's still tramping up and down the braes, doing her paper-round, and smoking her Woodbines and drinking her gill of whisky a day.

Mum says that Kate and Dan fought all the time, and that Dan was a mean, old bugger, who used to batter Kate and kick her cat when he was drunk. He was a soldier in the First World War,

but the war apparently turned him sour. There's a framed picture of him in his soldier's uniform hanging in Nana's living room. When you pass the picture, he glowers down at you with that proud look of his and those fierce whiskers. He's sitting in his bonnet and kilt, a big sword hanging at his side. Gran's still got that sword in her house. It's black and blunt now, but she uses it to chop the kindling.

As well as Annie, Kate and Dan had a son called Jock, who was killed in Normandy in the Second World War. Jock was posthumously awarded the Military Medal, for courage on the field of action. His name is inscribed on the memorial plaque that's on the wall below the Jubilee clock in the High Street. I wonder if Dad was there the day that Kate and Dan received the news about Jock. Their house must have been an awful sad place that day.

Kate's quite a legend in the Ferry, really. I remember she came to visit us one afternoon a few years ago. She sat talking to Mum in the living room for hours, with us kids listening in, fascinated by her stories.

'It's been a long life, right enough, Mary,' she said at one point. 'Some of it good. A hellish lot of it bad. It's the wildness in me that's kept me going. The good times are the ones to remember. I could spend all day talking about them and still not be finished. The weddings. The funerals; aye, sometimes. The christenings. Diddling my bairns on my knee, and my grandbairns, and my great grandbairns. The Hogmanay parties: fu' to the gunnels, singing like a lintie, jigging like auld Nick, the De'il himself. The Ferry Fairs. Christ, I shinned up the Greasy Pole every year until I was near to sixty!'

Stopping to light another Woodbine, she stared into the clouds of smoke and clucked quietly.

‘Aye, the good times. Gone now, though, and all my friends with them. Even auld Johnnie’s dead. Christ, I knew him for years, Mary, since we were bairns. My, what times we had, what parties, with Johnnie and his auld fiddle!

‘And who can forget the Ferry Fairs when Killiecrankie turned up, fu’ as a puggy, with the red Heilan’ jacket and the sodjer’s bunnet and the pair of black boots tied to the pike over his shoulder. What a sight he was! He would ring the toon crier’s bell, the one he kept polished all year, and he would belt out the proclamation at the top of his voice. Aye, Killiecrankie and me, we’d drink and sing and dance the night away...’

Poor Gran. She was too upset to come to Dad’s funeral. Mum said it was because she was scared to go to the cemetery and see Dan’s grave again, knowing that she would be lying beside him in a few years’ time. She once told Mum that she could feel that wicked old man chuckling with glee, biding his time, waiting for Kate to join him.

‘He was bad to me in life, Mary,’ she had said. ‘What’ll he be like in eternity?’

Well, that might not have been her only reason for staying away from the funeral. I heard some people say she couldn’t bear the pain of knowing that she had outlived her grandson, the little boy whom she had raised and was so close to. Because that’s right: as far as people in the Ferry were concerned back then, Dad was brought up by Kate and Dan as if he was their own son. He even took their name, being known to everyone to this day as Derry McKay.

Imagine how that would feel if it happened to you. You’re a little boy. You’re taken away from your father, who’s no longer

interested in you, and your mother farms you out to your granny. Both your mother and father are now more intent on raising their new families. You're treated as the unwanted son. Then you lose your own name and become someone else, like an orphan. I would've been hurt and lonely and devastated by it all, but none of it seemed to have affected Dad. Right up until about a year ago, he was forever cheerful and happy-go-lucky. In spite of the problems and the lack of money, he always acted as if he was riding on the crest of a wave. Once, years ago, I remember walking with him down to the High Street. For the whole of that journey, he had a smile and a nice word for every single person we passed, and they for him. Even though he was brought up by Kate and Dan, and he had that wild, Highland McKay blood in him, he didn't possess any of their fierceness. He was the opposite of them: softer and more refined. There was a gentleness in him that he must have inherited from his father.

Fuck! Thinking about Dad like that is making me want to bubble again. I'll be snivelling soon if I'm not careful. I need to close my eyes tight, to concentrate, to think about the next part of his story.