

MAGDA

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Try and picture the scene: it's winter. Edinburgh is renowned for being cold and windy, and that's just its residents. The prevailing wind is from the south-west, as it is almost everywhere in the island, a wind that brings raw, wet Atlantic storms, often at gale-force speed. Two or three times each winter, though, the wind swings round to the east and biting winds drive in from the North Sea for days on end. The weather might be dry, even sunny, but it's bitterly cold, sweeping across from Scandinavia and the Russian Steppes to chill the warmest heart. Edinburgh is right in the firing line of these meteorological villains.

At least Edinburgh doesn't normally experience much snow; that's mainly reserved for the hills and the ski resorts north of the Central Belt. But March 2018 wasn't part of a normal winter: like the rest of Britain, the entire country had inches – in many places, several feet – of snow.

Edinburgh ground to a halt. Actually, its city leaders *ordered* it to grind to a halt, sending schools, non-emergency hospital patients, and non-essential workers home to cower in the shelter of their own homes until the snow disappeared and it was safe to come out.

One might debate whether or not my job fell into the

category of 'essential worker'. Since taking slightly early retirement from my job as a teacher, I'd been supplementing my income by doling out americanos, cappuccinos, macchiatos, lattes and flat whites in the West End Costa Cafe shop. The great and the good of Edinburgh West End society certainly depended on, and appreciated, my high-class barista skills. I'd even won 'Costa Barista of the Month' the previous November.

Now, though, I'd been sent home, and there was nothing for it but to turn my collar up, although that wasn't a lot of use, really. What I really needed was my cap, a navy blue item with a short peak that had been given to me by a very good friend who insisted on calling me 'Captain'. I didn't really mind, and to be honest the cap does look a bit like the sort of thing old guys on barges wear. But I minded having accidentally left it at home because I'm old enough to be more than a little thin on top and I could feel some more pretty nasty stuff starting to descend on me.

At least I didn't have far to go, because I still lived in Eton Terrace, no more than five minutes' walk across the Dean Bridge from the cafe. I'm not sure if what I could manage in my early sixties constitutes 'running', but I broke into a breathless sort of fast jog as I crossed the Dean Bridge itself, every bit as exposed as the Himalayas. Irritated, I was held up, first by a bunch of youths coming in the opposite direction who seemed to think my antics were amusing; then by someone in front of me who was plugged into earphones and neither knew nor cared about my presence directly behind her. Eventually, I found the shelter of my little haven on the north-east side of the bridge, and in no time after that I was inside my flat, settled

in for the rest of the evening, and with a cup of coffee in my hand. Instant, of course.

So I was therefore not in the best of moods when the doorbell rang just five minutes later. I hadn't a clue who it might be – I mean, it could have been a serial killer. But you open the door anyway, don't you?

Whatever I was expecting, it wasn't the young woman in her thirties who was standing in my doorway. I'd met her before, in a past life, and she wasn't a serial killer but she might have been a serial one or two other things instead. She was dressed casually, in denim jeans and a thick woollen jumper, over which she'd draped a rather worn-looking black jacket. Given the six inches of snow even in the city centre streets, her trainers looked a little inadequate.

The last time I'd seen her, she was wearing one item of clothing, just one, a black leather one-piece thing which zipped all the way down the front from the neckline to the crotch. Well almost. And she was wearing glasses, quite needlessly as she had perfect vision, but the frames were a fashion item, incredibly expensive Crespo frames valued at over a thousand pounds a pair. The spectacles were the only survivors of our last meeting.

'Magda,' I said.

'Kuptin,' she replied. 'I um homeluss. And they vunt to deport me.'

'But Magda,' I said, although the words were no sooner from my mouth than I knew the answer that was coming, 'why do they want to deport – deport – you?'

She looked at me as if I were an alien being. 'Brrexitt, Kuptin. Do you nuffer read the news?'

Magda was a Polish acquaintance of mine who had once performed an enormous favour for me. She'd come over some years previously looking to earn enough money to support her ageing parents. But then she'd fallen out with them over something petty, leaving Magda neither wishing to go back to Poland, nor particularly needing to find a settled job. To keep body and soul together, she'd picked up a job as a 'dancer' in a Falkirk night club without quite realising that the 'dancing' involved a few other things as well. Not that Magda minded, so long as she got something out of it, too, be it money or pleasure. And she could look after herself: more than once, rough or over-zealous clients found themselves staring at a knife pointing directly at their eyes from a distance of less than an inch.

Then Magda had met Tam Cantlay. Tam had been a very, very minor pop star around 1970, but he'd been exploited mercilessly by his recording company on account of his diminutive size: just 4'7" in his stocking soles. By the time their paths crossed, Tam was much older, but Magda had instantly felt sorry for Tam, in whom she saw a decent, gentle soul. He had felt more than a little sorry for her, too.

And he didn't let her down either. He teamed her up with a Falkirk boy band called the C-U Jimiz for an adventure that brought them all a little fame and even a little fortune: promoting a little rock band called The Flying Saucers. That was where I came in: I happened to be The Flying Saucers' front man and songwriter.

‘So... what happened after *The Flying Saucers*?’ I asked her. By now, she was sitting on my sofa, warming up beside my hot, but completely fake, wood-burning stove.

‘Nothing. I went back to vot I hudd been doing before I met you. Duncing and sux.’ Magda’s life always seemed to involve an awful lot of sex, some of it remunerated, some not. ‘But now ve huff Brrrexitt,’ she added.

Magda had lived in Britain for quite a few years and had a perfectly good grasp of the nouns and verbs that make up the English language, but her accent was resolutely eastern European. It became worse when she got angry.

‘What reasons are they giving for trying to deport you, Magda? Do you know?’

‘It all started when I applied for benefits.’

‘Are you actually unemployed, Magda? Are you entitled to any benefits?’

‘No. Does it matter? I thought there vus no harm in asking.’

‘Generally, Magda, it matters.’

She shrugged her shoulders. ‘Anyway, then they said I do not belong here because I am not Brrrittish. But who would vont to be Brrrittish ven you treat voreigners so buddly?’

Now it was my turn to shrug my shoulders.

‘I didn’t vote for Brexit, Magda.’

‘It’s vot they ull say, Kuptin. They are all snecks here.’ I’d almost forgotten: Magda regarded all people she distrusted – and that was most of them – as reptiles.

‘Up here in Scotland, we voted strongly to stay in the European Union,’ I corrected her. ‘Here in Edinburgh more

than anywhere else.’

‘No, some of you are not snecks, purrhupps. You are feesh. Your MPs in London are snecks.’

It took me a few moments to work out that Magda was referring to Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland’s two most recent First Ministers. It hadn’t previously occurred to me that Magda might be so observant. Yes, I had to accept that we Scots were drawn towards maritime species for leadership: the captain of the most successful rugby team in modern times had been called David Sole, while I myself had always loved Captain Haddock in the Tintin books.

‘Very clever, Magda,’ I said, utterly condescendingly. ‘But you can’t stay here.’

She looked at me blankly. ‘Vy nutt? Huff you no other rooms?’

‘No... it’s just that...’

‘Vot?’ Not angry, simply persistent.

‘Well... there’s Jane in the flat upstairs.’

Even through her glasses, Magda managed to look bemused: Jane was my ex-wife. Our marriage had gone up in flames some years previously and the fact that she had ended up as my next-door neighbour was a long story that I knew Magda could never understand.

‘Do you have suxx with her, Kuptin?’ Magda’s principal life currency was still sex, despite her circumstances, it seemed. Briefly, I wondered how she managed to earn any money at all, then put the thought quickly out of my mind.

‘Magda,’ I said, ‘I’m afraid that’s none of your business.’

‘Thut means yuss. Good. Everyone needs suxx.’

‘Do they?’ I said, stumbling around. ‘I mean, it’s none of your business.’

‘So you and she do nutt huff suxx?’

‘Magda, what Jane and I do together is our business.’

‘So you do something together, Kuptin? There, that wasn’t so hurrdd.’ She managed a smug, triumphant smile.

I was about to say more, then realised I was digging myself slightly deeper into my hole. I decided to outstare her, a titanic contest that lasted fully three minutes before she – to my surprise and delight – blinked and looked away.

‘You huff turned into a bully, Kuptin. I do nutt like you any more. You are a sneck.’

‘No I’m not, Magda. I simply want to stop you being deported. Do you want my help or not?’

She looked away, hurt. It took me a few seconds before I realised that she was quite close to tears, a sight I’d not seen before. It was a moment that required great strength of character on my part: I must not show weakness. There was no chance of that. Gently, I reached across, took her in my arms and hugged her. To be honest I was a little surprised that she allowed me to do so.

Eventually Magda pulled away, stood up, grabbed a paper tissue from the box on the kitchen worktop and dabbed her eyes.

‘They say I um Polish, Kuptin. I um not Brrittish. That seems to be enough to throw me out of the country.’

‘I’ve heard that’s how it works, Magda.’ I could offer no consolation.

‘I am nutt needed. I am vurthless,’ she sniffed.

‘You’re not worthless, Magda. Nobody’s worthless, and you’re certainly not.’

‘Thank you, Kuptin. You are kind. But your country’s sneaks say I do not belong here. I need to be of exceptional value, and they say I am not.’

Then she sat down, took a deep breath and looked around my room to find something else to talk about. Her eyes fell on my guitar, which was propped up in the corner.

‘Are you still singing and playing your guitar, Kuptin?’ she asked.

‘After a fashion.’

‘Are you still writing songs?’

‘After a fashion.’

‘Are they still pish?’ This was a new departure. Magda had never previously indicated that she thought my songs were either good or bad. I was a little hurt.

‘I didn’t know you didn’t like my songs, Magda. Why don’t you like them?’

‘The words are push, Kuptin.’ She said it to rhyme with ‘crush’ or ‘mush’.

Now I found myself moving on from ‘hurt’ to ‘stung’.

‘You were happy enough to dance to to them.’

‘I was getting paid to dunce to them. I liked getting paid.’

‘Are you always this unpleasant, Magda?’

She looked mystified. ‘But Kuptin, I um nutt being unpleasant. I um being truthful. Do you vont me to tell lies?’

I wasn’t quite sure how to respond. Eventually I said, ‘I’d like you to be a little kinder to me, Magda. Those songs I write are the best I can manage.’ Then I added, a little petulantly,

‘Anyway, you can only speak for the ones you’ve heard me sing. Perhaps some of my other songs would meet your approval?’

‘You have written other songs?’

‘For other people, yes.’

In truth I had written just one song that anyone else had shown the slightest interest in singing. The avant-garde folk musician Jack Lennox was best known for singing a mixture of his own original pieces and Scottish traditional music accompanied by a selection of electric bagpipes, accordions, penny whistles and harps. Lennox and I shared the same solicitor, Duncan ‘Walnut’ MacIntyre. Lennox was a notorious snob about the sources of his material. For a bit of fun, Walnut had pushed my song his way without saying who had written it, challenging him to say why it wasn’t good enough for him to include in his shows.

Lennox had taken the bait, but decided that it would actually complement the rest of his act better if he sang it unaccompanied. Over the past few months the song had caught the public imagination, all the more so because Lennox was having to admit that the song was new and it was as much of a mystery to him who had written it as it was to anyone else. However he went on to reassure audiences that someone was receiving royalties. (In fact the royalties were all going into an account that Walnut had set up especially for my song. I had asked him if I was going to see any of it, all he would say was ‘All in good time, all in good time.’)

Being a little less off the wall than some of his own work, Lennox found that my song was the one that everyone wanted to hear. He was asked to appear on at rugby internationals,

at political party conferences, even on that year's Hogmanay broadcasts. Biggest of all, though, he was asked to finish with it at folk and rock festivals, including Glastonbury.

'So, Kuptin, am I allowed to hear this song you huff written?'

'You might have heard it already.'

'Can I dance to it?'

'No,' I had to admit.

'In which case I vill huff pedd it no attention.' Then she added, 'But you may sing it for me anyway.'

'It's a difficult song to sing. It's hard to get the breathing right.' In fact, one reason I had let Walnut tease Lennox with my song was because I was in my sixties, and these things were getting harder.

'Are you saying you don't vont me to hear it?'

'No. I'm just saying I might not be very good.'

'I know that already, Kuptin.' Seeing my hurt, she added, 'Do you vont me to lie? Anyway, I'd like you to sing this song for me. Then I vill tell you if it is pish.'

So I sang my song, or at least gave it my best shot. Titled *The Shores of Caledonia*, it was very different from the rock and pop stuff I'd written previously. I thought of it as my anti-Brexit song, my answer to the racists and xenophobes who had joined forces with those who, perhaps for quite genuine reasons, had voted in 2016 for Britain to leave the European Union. Scotland had voted strongly to stay in, my home city of Edinburgh even more so. I was furious that I felt so powerless to do anything, and I felt furious that migrants – people like Magda – should be made to feel so unwelcome. The Brexit

referendum didn't speak for me. *The Shores of Caledonia* was my way of saying that incomers were still welcome in Scotland.

I'd no way of accompanying the song – it didn't work on a guitar or piano – so, like Lennox, I just sang it unaccompanied. When I reached the end, I waited for some sort of reaction from Magda. None was forthcoming, not a flicker.

'Well,' I said, eventually, 'what do you think?'

'Pish.'

'Is that your verdict on the song or on the singer?'

'Both, Kuptin. Your singing is pish. You used to be better than that. But the song is utter pish. I um *nutt* welcome, you know that verry well. So your song is utter pish. I would curry on pretending you huffn't written it.'

I sat back and smiled wryly. I was getting used to her directness. 'So that's a 'no', then?'

'It's pish, Kuptin. Vot more can I say?'

'You could pretend you like it. You're asking for my help.'

'Are you going to put me back out in the snow, Kuptin?'

'Of course not. You could die out there. You can stay here tonight in the spare room.' Then I added, 'Just tonight.'

'Thank you, Kuptin. You urr a good man.'

I had the sense that, for Magda, it was mission accomplished. She had somewhere to stay for the night, and tomorrow was another day. And perhaps she had a point about *The Shores of Caledonia*.

The following morning brought glorious sunshine, but fresh heavy snow had fallen during the night and in my basement flat I almost felt snowed in. With no sign of Magda, I made myself

a little treat: a breakfast of orange juice, a bacon sandwich and some coffee. Just as I was draining my coffee mug, Magda appeared wearing a tee shirt that was short enough to have me looking away in some embarrassment, especially when she sat down on a chair at the far end of the table.

‘Sleep well, Magda?’ I asked, keeping my eyes firmly fixed on yet another shirt catalogue that I’d thrown aside earlier.

‘Yes, thank you.’ She said nothing, which somehow made me glance up. Even more of her was visible. She added, ‘This is your house, Kuptin. You can look at whatever you like. Do you find me unattractive?’

‘Magda, I’m twice your age.’

‘But do you find me attractive?’ Then she added, ‘Suxxy?’

‘Of course I find you attractive, Magda. But you’re a attractive *young* woman, a guest in my house, and I want you to feel you can trust me.’ I ignored the sexy bit. To change the subject, I suggested she make herself some breakfast while I had a shower. Magda nodded, but asked if she could use my washing machine to let her wash her clothes.

That gave me the chance to escape to the relative safety of the shower, although it had been a long time since I’d last had to lock the bathroom door. Showers are loud, especially mine, and I’d never been able to hear anything going on outside. Later, I was to discover I’d missed the phone ringing.

When I emerged from the shower almost thirty minutes later, Magda had turned into my ex-wife Jane.

‘Hello,’ I said. ‘How are things with you?’

She explained that she’d called to see if I was in, received no reply, so just let herself in anyway. We shared routine

pleasantries, which gave me the chance to explain that Magda had dropped by the previous evening, although I didn't have the time to explain that she'd spent the night in my spare room.

For all that our marriage had gone up in flames, I still liked having Jane close by. She could be dangerous to fall out with, prone to throwing things, but we still shared a great deal. Most of all, we shared two children and two grandchildren, and we saw more of them if we lived near to each other and managed to co-exist in each other's company. We each tried to be friends as well as neighbours, and we even had keys to each other's flats. But our relationship was fragile, and she could be easily upset.

So the last thing I needed at that point was for a completely naked Magda to stroll into the kitchen. Actually, not completely naked: she was still wearing her Crespo glasses.

Understandably, it took everyone a moment to take everything in. Magda always looked quizzical behind her glasses anyway. I wanted to explain everything but couldn't work out where to start. Jane was putting two and two together and coming up with entirely the wrong figure.

'Brian,' she said in low voice filled with fury, 'how could you? How could you?'

I didn't get the chance to explain. She turned back around towards the front door, opened it, stepped out, then slammed it shut behind her with a force that caused every pane of glass in my house to shake.

Magda looked at the front door.

'She has nutt changed, Kuptin. Why do you allow her into your house?'

I shook my head.

‘Magda, why are you standing there without a stitch of clothing on?’

‘My clothes are in the vosh. Are you getting forgetful in your old age, Kuptin?’

‘But why aren’t you wearing something in the meantime?’

‘Because – it – is – all – in – the – vosh, Kuptin. I verr my clothes then vosh them. Is that nutt vot you do?’ As ever, her logic was impeccable.

‘Can I lend you something to wear in the meantime, Magda? A shirt? A pair of shorts?’

‘I think I might be the wrong size for your shorts, Kuptin. Your shirts might be like a dress on me. Do you find me ugly? Would you like me to wear a dress?’

‘I most certainly don’t find you ugly, Magda. But I think I’d prefer you to wear some clothes while Jane’s around, please. That’s if she ever speaks to me again.’

‘Do you care about this woman, Kuptin?’

For once, I didn’t have to think.

‘Yes, Magda, I care about Jane. She’s the mother of my children, we’ve been through a lot together and she also happens to be a close neighbour. I like to think we’re still friends. So I’m not happy that she’s not happy. Can’t you at least wear that tee-shirt I gave you last night?’

‘You urr a strange munn, Kuptin. The tee-shirt is in the vosh, too. I thought you’d be huppy.’ She turned around and stretched out on the sofa, which didn’t help the situation at all. Then she added, ‘This is your house, Kuptin. I really don’t mind if you look at me. Actually, I’d be insulted if you didn’t.’

Instead of looking at her, I tried to think what to do to appease Jane. There was little point in going up to see her to explain: she'd started to Hoover the flat, which created a tremendous racket on her bare floorboards. I knew from long experience that it was unwise, even dangerous, to interrupt one of her temper-tantrum vacuum cleaning sessions. Today, she was clearly using her industrial-strength model, a yellow and black beast which she knew drove me mad in my flat below.

Magda, curiously, seemed unconcerned. 'If your wife's house is that dirty, perhaps she should clean it more often.'

'I'll let you tell her that,' I yelled over the top of the mayhem.

Jane kept it up for around twenty minutes or so, when by chance the washing machine cycle and her Hoovering came to an end almost at exactly the same time. In my confusion, I hadn't noticed that Magda had actually hand-washed a pair of black knickers and a matching bra and had been drying them over a radiator. It was a major relief to see her at least pulling on some underwear. Not that it covered very much.

I realised that I needed to speak to Walnut about Magda's situation, so I phoned his office. I had to remind myself that in the world of Edinburgh solicitors, he had a different identity.

'I'll see if Mr MacIntyre's available, sir. Who shall I say is calling?'

Seconds later, Walnut's dulcet Edinburgh tones were singing down the telephone. 'Good morning, Brian, old boy! To what do I owe the pleasure? Your song's coining in the royalties, I must say.' No wonder he was pleased with himself: he was collecting twenty percent.

‘Do you know Magda’s here?’ I said, dismissing all nicities.

‘Ah well... I suppose that was my idea,’ he confessed. ‘I thought you might be able to help her. After all...’ Walnut’s voice tailed off. He knew that I was due Magda a favour. In fact he’d been involved in that episode in my life, too, which was why he was apparently prepared to be her solicitor for nothing. Mind you, I suspected that Walnut, being a lawyer, would simply make sure that his other clients would share the burden instead.

‘What am I supposed to do with her?’ I said, exasperated. ‘Magda can’t stay here. She needs a home of her own, and she needs work, or the authorities will kick her out.’

‘Even with a home and a job, the authorities might still kick her out. She needs to convince them that she’s a special case.’

‘Isn’t it enough that Magda’s a one-off?’ I asked, although I knew I was simply being hopeful. Magda was a good dancer, but then so were plenty of other young men and women.

Sure enough, Walnut ignored me. ‘If she doesn’t qualify by being British, Magda can only stay here in the ‘exceptional circumstances’ category. She needs a home, a job, and she needs to offer something special to our society. I could probably employ her in the office here, but I could employ anyone, really. You could supply the home – ’

‘She’d still be homeless,’ I pointed out.

‘I was about to point out, before you interrupted me...’ – Walnut paused for effect – ‘...that staying with you only stops her from dying of hypothermia. She needs somewhere

permanent. And her job needs to use her unique skills. I thought you might know more than most of us about those.’ I heard a chuckle at the other end of the phone line as a few sordid thoughts passed through Walnut’s brain. He had a sleazy side to him.

Now it was my turn to ignore him. ‘I think that’s going to be the difficult part, Walnut.’ I knew he hated anyone using his nickname. ‘We need to make Magda into something special in everyone’s eyes, not just ours. It seems to me that it’s your job to create a case for her. Isn’t that what lawyers do?’

‘Well personally I can’t see what we can do to help her,’ Walnut snapped. ‘The girl’s her own worst enemy sometimes.’

There was little point in falling out with him. And he was right, Magda was a loose cannon who didn’t always seem to appreciate how much was being done for her. But those six inches of snow outside meant I was stuck with her at least in the short term. And when I apologised to Walnut, he returned the apology, so that our conversation was civil for its final few minutes before he rang off.

It was only when I returned the telephone to its charging point in the kitchen that I realised that I’d no idea where Magda was. I called out her name, but there was no reply and she seemed to be hiding in my flat somewhere. I was just starting to become concerned when the front door opened and the young woman in question swept through, closely followed by Jane and a blast of arctic air. Jane had thrown a coat on; incredibly, Magda was still only wearing her underwear.

‘Can someone please explain what’s going on here?’ I said, before I turned specifically to Magda and said, ‘Please tell me

you haven't been out in the cold dressed like that.'

'Of course, Kuptin. The rest of my clothes are not yet dry. It is verry cold out there, though.'

'I'll bet.' I looked at Jane. 'Can you tell me what's happened here? Please.'

Jane chuckled. 'Where do I start, Brian? Magda came up, dressed like that... and tried to insist that your relationship with her was non-sexual. At first I didn't really believe her, but then I realised that she must be desperate to convince me if she had stepped outside dressed like that. And when she offered to sleep with me –'

'What?'

'I offered to huff sux with her, Kuptin. For all I knew, she might have preferred women to men. I prefer men, but I'd have had sux with her to make her happy. Although I'd have done it for you, Kuptin, not Jane. You are a good man. You do not try to use me. And although I've slept in your bed a couple of times, you've always left me alone. That is verry strange, but quite nice, actually.'

'So I've come down to apologise, Brian,' Jane added. 'I should have known you better than that. And of course I have a key to your front door which meant I could make sure that Magda didn't have to stand on the doorstep in the snow for any longer than necessary.'

I shrugged my shoulders. 'It's OK, Jane, Magda confuses me rather a lot.'

Magda was looking backwards and forwards between Jane and me as we spoke. 'I um confused, too, Kuptin. You divorced this woman – she is surely your enemy?'

‘No, Magda, it’s not as simple as that. We do try to stay friends.’

‘Well, Kuptin, your marriage is as strange as your song.’

‘What song?’ Jane said. ‘Have you written a new song?’

I was about to get cross with Magda for letting the cat out of the bag. But then I had a brainwave.

‘You can’t be serious,’ Walnut said down the phone. ‘You’ll never pull it off. No one would ever believe it.’

‘Not at all,’ I said. ‘It’s perfect. It solves all the problems.’

‘Apart from costing you a lot of money?’

‘Is it really a lot?’

There was a pause at the end of the phone. ‘Shed loads, Captain. Shed loads. The fact that Jake Lennox himself doesn’t know who wrote it has caught the music world’s imagination. I keep getting calls from the media about the damn thing.’

‘But of course you can answer that it would be a breach of client confidentiality to say who wrote the song.’

‘That’s exactly what I do say, Captain. All they know is that the person who wrote it can’t really sing it properly, but it’s very personal. But all that does is heighten interest and increase your royalties.’

‘What does Lennox himself say?’

‘He’s thrilled with how things are going. This album of his, *Celtic Correspondence*, has gone platinum. He’s in the States just now playing to sell-out stadium audiences. So long as the pennies are rolling in, Mr Lennox is happy.’

‘Sounds like he’d make an excellent lawyer.’

‘He probably would,’ Walnut said, ignoring the jibe. ‘Meanwhile, does the woman in question know of this hare-brained scheme of yours?’

‘Not yet. I thought I should run it past you first to see if it’s possible.’

‘It’s entirely possible, Captain. But it’s also madness.’

‘Do you think it’ll work?’ I asked him.

Walnut said nothing for a while. Then I heard a faint, strange noise from the other end of the line, which gradually grew louder and louder until I realised that Walnut was laughing – no, guffawing.

‘Are you all right, Walnut?’ I said, alarmed. ‘Speak to me!’

‘I’m – sorry – Captain – it’s – just – so – funny,’ Walnut said, gradually bringing himself under control.

‘But will it work?’ I asked again, patiently.

‘That’s what’s so funny,’ he said, still struggling to get the words out. ‘It just might, if she’s up for it.’

Later that day I invited Jane down to my flat for a cup of coffee with Magda and me. Magda was fully clothed, there had been no more snow that day, and a thaw was forecast at last. Hopefully, things were looking up all round. Jane and Magda were even sitting on the same sofa, directly across from me. Jane had bought a packet of those little chocolate-covered swiss rolls as a peace offering, and we tucked in contentedly for a few minutes before Jane asked what I wanted to discuss.

I produced a single sheet of A4 sheet music from a ring binder.

‘Magda’s heard this already, Jane, but I’d like you to hear

it, too. She doesn't think it's very good and I don't really have the ability to sing it very well any more. If I ever did,' I added hastily. 'But these days I'm older and this song really tests my sixty-year-old lungs.'

'You're actually sixty-two,' Jane remanded me.

I started to sing *The Shores of Caledonia*, unaccompanied. As I did so, Jane said, 'But that's....'

'Vy urr you singing this song, Kuptin? It is pish. I told you that before. I do not like this song.'

I ignored them both and carried on until I reached the end.

'Well I like that song, Brian,' Jane said, 'and I strongly agree with its sentiments. I'm not sure you're really up to singing it, mind you – you sounded as though you were struggling a little.'

'Guilty as charged. I admit I can't sing it very well.'

'Hang on,' Jane said. 'That's what Jake Lennox says about the song when he sings it. Are you trying to tell us that you know who wrote that song, Brian?' Jane said. 'Or are you trying to tell us that *you* wrote it yourself? It's a client of Walnut's, I know that, but it's very different from your other stuff. It never really occurred to me.'

'Not me, I didn't write it,' I lied, passing the sheet music across to the pair of them.

Jane looked at it, spotted the name in the corner, then looked at Magda, who looked even more bewildered than usual. Jane covered her mouth to conceal her own laughter – this song of mine seemed to be a source of great mirth – then leant across and whispered something in Magda's ear.

“Words and music by Magda Czezlawska?’ No, Kuptin, this is pish. Utter pish. It is a pish song and if you wrote it you should be ashamed to be trying to blame me. You are a sneck, just like all the other snecks. Vurse, actually. You urr a sneck sneck.’ She spat the last few words as though she herself were a hissing snake.

‘You don’t like it?’

‘No, Kuptin. I do nutt vish to be associated with this pish. I am nutt velcum in this country so this song is pish.’

‘I think I get the message, Magda. Do you know what royalties are?’

‘Is that your king and queen?’

‘Not quite. Royalties are what songwriters get paid every time someone plays, or records their song. It’s not a lot. I get four pence every time one of my songs gets played.’

‘Four pence isn’t much.’

‘Some songs get played quite a lot. There’s over £80,000 sitting in an account waiting to be collected for *The Shores of Caledonia*.’

‘£80,000?!’ Jane and Magda said in unison.

‘And counting. There’s a lot more coming, I’m told. That money would be yours, Magda. What’s more, how could any government kick you out now? The reason you can’t sing the song is because your accent isn’t Scottish enough yet, but you’re trying as best you can. Meantime you’ve just written an iconic song about how we Scots see the world.’

‘You’re not exactly selling your song short here, are you, Brian?’ Jane said with more than a touch of sarcasm in her voice. “Iconic?”

‘A song is only as good as its spin,’ I suggested. ‘Even you have to admit it’s a great story.’

Jane chuckled. ‘I suppose it might work...’ She turned to Magda, who still seemed to be taking everything in. ‘What do you think, Magda?’

Magda looked at each of us. ‘Did you say £80,000?’

‘No, Magda, much more,’ I reassured her.

She sighed, then cocked her head to one side in thought, another gesture I’d never seen before.

‘And they will nutt deport me?’

‘Walnut says that there’s no way the author of that song could ever be deported, Magda. The song’s become a second Scottish national anthem. And unlike *The Flower of Scotland*, it’s not got that anti-English theme. So everyone likes it.’

‘I think I huff written a verry good song, Kuptin.’

Jane looked at me carefully. ‘It’s a generous gesture, Brian. An awful lot of money. You’re sure about this?’ But she knew the answer in advance.

‘Definitely. I’m comfortably enough off, what with my work pension and the income from my other songs. There’s no need to be greedy. Only you, me, Magda herself and Walnut need ever know. And I’ll get a lot of pleasure out of seeing the song being used for good.’

Magda tuned in at last.

‘Vot pleasure did you have in mind, Kuptin? Of course I vill have sux with you. That vill be my pleasure. Vot else would you like? You are being verry kind to me.’

I reached out to cup Magda’s face in my hand.

‘Magda, the pleasure I get will be that you owe me nothing

at all.’

‘Not even sex?’ I noticed that her Polish accent was all but gone for a moment. A few tears were dribbling down her cheeks. Today was witnessing a lot of Magda ‘firsts’.

‘Especially not sex,’ I said. ‘You need to believe that men – mostly – just aren’t like that.’ Jane passed me a tissue and I dried Magda’s eyes a little. ‘Go and phone Walnut, Magda. After all, he’s your lawyer. Tell him you’re ready to go public with your story.’

‘And claim the money?’

‘Definitely. Claim the money. But get Walnut to advise you about what you need to spend your money on – getting a house, a job and so on. Don’t waste it, you’re going to need every penny, believe me. Anyway, go and make that phone call.’

She disappeared into the spare room, leaving me alone with Jane.

‘Are you sure you’re doing the right thing, Brian?’

‘It’s too late to go back on it now. But of course it’s the right thing.’

‘A man of principle then. I always did like men of principle. And you even resisted the offer of sex.’

I looked at her. ‘She’s young enough to be our daughter, Jane. Not that these things seem to matter to Magda.’

She laughed, then glanced towards the window. It was a beautiful sunny day, but the snow was still deep. She drew me closer to her, surprisingly close considering that she and I had once been through such a bitter divorce.

‘We’ll need to find Magda a house to live in,’ I said. She needs a proper place of her own, quickly, at least until the

authorities give her formal permission to stay. She can't live with me.'

'I need to be honest with myself, Brian.' I wondered what was coming next. 'I'm relieved that you and Magda never...' Her voice tailed off.

I looked at her and smiled. 'Are you saying that you were a little... jealous?'

She shrugged her shoulders. To be honest, her admission was a surprise. She looked away, embarrassed, before she turned back and broke the silence.

'I can think of one place Magda could stay. You might not like it.'

I looked at her, genuinely baffled.

'She could stay here in your flat,' she said. 'You could rent it to her and move out yourself.'

I burst out laughing. 'Thank you very much!' I said. 'So you make me homeless so that Magda doesn't have to be.'

'I said you might not like the suggestion. But you wouldn't be homeless. You could move upstairs in with me until Magda finds somewhere permanent. After all, we've done it before.'

'Are you serious?' To be honest, I wasn't sure what Jane was offering.

'It would save on my heating bill,' she said. I still wasn't sure. 'And it would just be until Magda gets herself sorted.'

'OK... when would this arrangement start?'

'As soon as possible, I'd suggest. Now?'

'Now? Right now?'

'Why not? Grab some clothes and a toothbrush. Bring your guitar if you want. But I think you should leave a note

for Magda.’

Hurriedly grabbing a Post-It, I scribbled something to leave alongside a spare key on the kitchen worktop. Jane glanced at what was written over my shoulder..

‘Well, Brian, that’s pretty explicit,’ she grinned. ‘Perhaps you have the wrong idea?’

‘That’s for Magda’s benefit. She’ll approve of what’s written there,’ I said. ‘And she’ll leave us in peace for a bit. What actually happens upstairs is our private business, don’t you think?’

‘Indeed, Brian. It’s our private business. Come on, let’s go,’ she said, and we let ourselves quietly out of the front door.

The Shores of Caledonia

Words and music by Gordon Lawrie

Freely ♩ = 120

1. Come all ye ci - ti - zens a - cross the land and lis - ten here by me, Come ye friends and neigh - bours
6 doc - tors, nurs - es, en - gin - eers, join - ers, plum bers, too, All ye car - ers for the
all from the oc - ean to the sea, Come all ye wand - er - ers from far and near who - ev - er you may
needy do what - ev - er you can do, Come in and share your cul - ture, share your skills, and if your spir - it's
12 be, Join me here on the shores of Cal - e - don - ia. 1. 2. Come all ye
true we'll find a place for all of you in Cal - e - don - - - ia. So reach a -
18
24 cross, take my hand, Come and join me where I stand, Come and help to make us strong in this
29 land where I be - long and if you stay we'll take you in with op - en arms and op - en
doors, You're wel - come here on the shores of Cal - e - don - - ia.

Verse 3 They came from Trinidad and Pakistan, Poland, France and Spain,
Our English cousins crossed the border and decided to remain,
Just like the Irish, who so long ago, gave this land their name
To the land the Romans knew as Caledonia.

(Chorus)

Verse 4 So no matter where you come from, what you do, or what you came here for
We'll build our bridges strong and solid like our ancestors before
And in the evening as the day goes down, we'll share a glass or four
In the sunset on the shores of Caledonia.

(Chorus, twice)

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