

Views from Edinburgh

After Reading

Here's a poem by Scottish-born Edinburgh-based writer, Rob Butlin. It's about one of the first things that people seem to think about when the name 'Scotland' is mentioned.

A RECIPE FOR WHISKY

Wring the Scottish rain clouds dry;
Take sleet, the driving snow, the hail;
Winter twilight; the summer's sun slowed down
to pearl-sheen dusk on hillsides, city-roofs,
on lochs at midnight.
And, most of all, take the years that have already run
to dust, the dust we spill behind us . . .

All this, distill. And cask. And wait.
The senselessness of human things resolves
to who we are - our present fate.
Let's taste, let's savour and enjoy.
Let's share once more.
Another glass for absent friends. Pour
until the bottle's done.

Here's life! Here's courage to go on!

1. There is a sense of timelessness about this poem, and yet it celebrates the here and now! How does the poet make this contrast? What expressions or words are used to tell us that the process is long; what tells us about the imminence of life?

There is also a real sense of a recipe – using language that we associate with creating things in the kitchen. Yet many of the ingredients aren't the things you would expect to find in a kitchen cupboard. Make a list of the imperative verbs used in the poem that we might usually find in a cooking recipe. Make a list of the 'unusual' ingredients we need to make whisky!

Find out what other, 'usual' ingredients are required to make whisky – water being just one of them!

2. What do you consider to be the national drink of Hungary*? What 'normal' ingredients are required to make it?

Now consider the kind of things mentioned in the poem that the poet says are needed to make whisky. Are any of these things required in the Hungarian* national drink? Are there other elements? Make a list.

Turn this list into short poem about Hungary's* national drink!

* substitute your own country

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After Reading

Here is a short story. It is by the Edinburgh author Rob Butlin. It is set in Edinburgh. The point of having this story is simply to enjoy the experience of reading it, and there is a short glossary at the end to help you. However, before you read the story you might like to consider the following:

- *Going to University in a city a long way from home*
- *Going to live with people you don't know*

And while you are reading:

- *The significance of everyone seeming to have nicknames*
- *What will happen when the weekend is over and the room mate comes back*

TAKING JAZZA'S PLACE

Rob Butlin

The shared flat the Student Accommodation Service had sent him to was on the top floor of a stone tenement held together by scaffolding; it stood in a cul-de-sac of uncollected binbags, broken glass, dog-shit and lack of sunlight. As he didn't know Edinburgh he was nearly forty minutes later than arranged. The stair-lights made a buzzing noise, flickering off and on, as he and his two suitcases made their way up to the top floor.

The guy who answered the door looked like the kind of person Simon's parents had warned him against: green hair, earrings, black leather waistcoat. "Hi, you'll be taking Jazza's place then?" And a friendly smile: "Come in. I'm Danny, by the way."

He was shown around the flat in less than two minutes. Danny, it seemed, had been waiting to let him in. "Here's the kitchen, and here's your shelf. . . That's your room down on the right - sharing with Colin who'll be back on Monday. . . That's my room. I share with Big Bozo, who'll be back on Monday as well. . . I'm off to my girlfriend's; make the most of your quiet weekend, it'll be the last. See you." The front door closed. Danny had gone.

A moment later he was back again: "Sorry to leave you like this . . . I forgot to say that the landlord lives opposite. He's called Tommy. Any problems, you can speak to him. Only if it's desperate though . . . Nice man, for a landlord, but not a lot of help . . . You won't have any problems though. See you Monday." The front door closed again. Danny's footsteps went hammering down the stairs. The street door banged. Danny was really gone this time.

He went down the corridor to his room on the right, banging his suitcases against the wall. Monday. He was going to be all on his own until Monday. He'd get unpacked. He'd make himself a cup of tea. He'd feel better.

First thing, he opened the window to air the room while he did what he could to make himself feel at home. But which drawers were his, and which Colin's? Which parts of the

wardrobe? There were clothes, books, computer disks, paper scattered everywhere. Both divans were unmade - one had a bare mattress and a sleeping-bag, the other sheets that glistened like fish and chip wrappings. Unfinished mugs of coffee, an open carton of milk and some half-eaten Chinese carry-outs in their silver containers stood on a chest of drawers, the window sill, bedside tables. Squashed beer cans lay on the floor. Wherever he went he scrunched fried rice and noodles into the carpet. He hoovered a path between his bed and the door. Above the sleeping-bag - his bed, as the more temporary-looking? - there was a old Noel Gallacher poster.

Having tidied up the room as much as possible without making it seem like he owned the place, he went out to buy a Chinese carry-out for himself. He ate it in front of the TV, the highlight of his first evening living away from home.

Newsnight had just finished when the telephone rang. It was a girl. A girl calling from a pub by the sound of it. Loud music, people talking and laughing in the background, people having a good time.

"Is Big Bozo there, please?"

"Sorry, he won't be back until Monday."

More laughter, as if another girl had come to stand next to her, then: "You must be the new guy that's moved into the flat. Taking over from Jazza?"

"Yes, that's me. I'm - "

"Oh well, be seeing you around, no doubt. Have a good weekend. Bye."

During the next two days he answered the phone several times and explained that he was taking over from Jazza; he bought a half dozen cans of beer and three carry-outs and walked himself into the ground visiting The Royal Botanical Gardens, Chambers Street Museum, Princes Street and Edinburgh Castle. He called home twice, removed and reinstated Noel Gallacher a dozen times.

He'd just come in from the street after an evening stroll down Lothian Road along to Haymarket and back up again, when he almost tripped over a large bundle of rags near the bottom step. The bundle of rags groaned.

An old man, his head nestling in the crook of his arm, was lying on the ground. Was he ill? A heart attack? Should he call a doctor? Get one of the neighbours? He might be dying.

He was about to step over him to ring one of the ground floor bells when:

"Thanks, son. Took a wee tumble to massel that's all. Had a bit of a night out."

"Can I help?"

Ten minutes later he was still hauling the old man up the stairs. First floor, then the second. They nearly tumbled down a few times. He was getting heavier at every step. The top floor - his landlord? The old man's key was on a piece of string he pulled from his pocket. He unlocked the door.

"Come in, son."

The hallway was pitch-dark.

"A wee disagreement wi the Electricity."

The stench grabbed him by the back of the throat: paraffin, cooking grease, unwashed clothes, a toilet somewhere nearby - and there were other smells he didn't recognise. The old man straightened up, having lit two candles that were stuck onto a square of cut-out lino.

"Ma chandelier. Let there be light, eh no! In you come. I was wanting to offer you a wee something for your kindness."

"No, really. Thanks, but - "

"There's some whisky around here somewhere, to recover us after all them stairs."

"No, thanks I - "

The landlord held up his chandelier and peered at him closely for the first time: "D'ye no drink, son?"

"I do, mostly beer though."

"Right enough."

The walls seemed bare apart from a pink bathroom cabinet nailed to the wall, the only cupboard. There was a mantelpiece, a boarded-up fireplace, two sagging armchairs, a low table covered in mugs, glasses, bottles, a packet of sugar, coffee jar. In one of the corners a heap of old towels, curtains and rags seemed to serve as a bed - it looked like a dog basket, without the basket or the dog.

"Takes it out of you these stairs, eh no?"

"Yes. Well, I'd better be - "

His landlord placed the chandelier on top of the cabinet. It had a mirror fixed to the front and Simon saw himself reflected there as a shadow against a darkened background. Time to leave, he thought. Time to say thanks for the offer of a drink, and goodbye.

His landlord was pointing to bits of paper stuck to the wall around the cabinet: "Ma collection. It's called The Tommy Baird Gallery of Scotland."

There were pictures torn from newspapers, magazines, some of them faded, some very recent. Cartoons, advertisements, mountain scenes, lochs, oil rigs, politicians, footballers, film stars . . .

"When I see something I like, or that's really important, then I tear it out - so long as it's Scottish, mind - and add it to the gallery. A ruler to keep things neat. No bad, eh?"

Simon peered closer: "The Forth Road Bridge, Edinburgh Castle, Dounray - "

"Clever boy!"

"Walter Scott Monument, Sean Connery - "

"Sir Sean Connery, as he should be."

"Oh. And there's that Braveheart - "

"Brave-arse, more like. American trash, but ye hiv tae keep up wi the times. See that yin?"

He handed Simon the chandelier: "Haud that, son. Ye're a bit steadier than me. Up a bit, an we'll see him better." He pointed to a yellowed and grainy newspaper picture that had been repaired with sellotape: "Ken him?"

Simon leant forward and stared.

"Haud it steady will ye."

"Sorry."

"John Maclean. The John Maclean." He brought his face up very close to Simon's: it was grey and red, like liver rolled in flour; the half-closed eyes had a startled look, like someone who'd been woken too soon. "He had a dream. A Socialist Scotland. Didnae ken that, did ye?"

"No"

"A dream." Then he turned away: "Bloody dreamer!"

There was a moment's pause.

"You said you'd some beer, son?"

Knowing he was making a big mistake, but not knowing how not to make it, Simon went to his flat and returned with two cans of lager. One each, then he'd leave. He was amazed how quickly it affected the old man who soon began slurring his words and rambling. Every so often he'd struggle to his feet and stagger across to examine his gallery. Simon always followed him, afraid he'd stumble and set the place on fire. The floor was littered with torn up newspapers.

"Archie Gemmel, Argentina '78," he might announce, then slump back into his seat.

At one point he suddenly turned to Simon: "So, what do you do that's so fucking wonderful?"

"I'm just finishing this, then I'll disappear." He smiled, trying to make a joke of it.

But the old man wasn't listening. He'd raised his arm as if for silence: "No, don't tell me." He was swaying back and forwards on his seat. Then he leant across the space between them: "A student!"

"Yes. First day's tomorrow."

"A fucking student. Am I right or am I wrong?"

"Yes. But - " trying to get something of his own into the conversation - "But what kind of student. Can you guess that?"

A long pause. Then: "Can I guess what?"

"What kind of student?"

"Does it fucking matter?"

"Well - "

Next moment his landlord was on his feet lurching from side to side in front of him and pointing almost in his face: "Does it really fucking matter what the fuck the likes of you are doing?"

"I think I'd better - "

"Aye, maybe ye had." The old man collapsed back on to his seat. "Sorry, son. That was out of order. I'm a bit tired, that's all. Nae offence, eh? G'night." He finished speaking, slipped sideways and passed out - all in one continuous movement.

Simon sat and looked at his landlord until he was quite certain he was asleep, then tried to take the can of beer from his hand, but it was held too tightly. Should he blow out the candles? He did so - in case of fire. A split-second later he realised he should have waited: now he'd have to feel his way by touch through the debris, right back to the door. For several moments he sat in the pitch dark, grinding his teeth together as he gathered the last of his strength. He cursed into himself with all the accumulated fury of his quiet weekend; he cursed his landlord snoring opposite, his absent flatmates, the Student Accommodation Service and, most of all, he cursed Jazza, wherever the hell he was.

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