

# HOGMANY 1963

By Ian Brown

Neither Colin nor I had received an invitation to a New Year's party. As a result, we decided to go out and celebrate Hogmany on our own. I arrived at Colin's house not knowing what he had in mind for the evening. I was in for a shock. Colin took me up to his room and produced from underneath his bed four large bottles of McEwan's pale ale and a full bottle of Dewar's whisky.

We decided to get a head start on the evening by drinking one of the bottles of beer before setting off. I still had not acquired a taste for beer. I didn't mind it in a shandy on a hot summer's day, but on its own I found it unpleasantly bitter. However, I was determined to get to like it, if for no other reason so that I wouldn't let my father down. He had started to offer me beer before lunch on Sunday and I was sure he would consider me less than a man if I declined.

We left Colin's house around 6-30. Even though I had drunk less than a pint of beer, I could feel that slightly giddy and uninhibited sensation that I was beginning to recognize as the hallmark of being high. As we walked down the road towards the bus stop our raincoat pockets bulging with the three remaining beer bottles and the bottle of whisky, I felt a lightness in my step that was not altogether to do with the McEwan's sloshing around inside me. It felt good to be doing something different, something a little less straight-laced and predictable than going to play golf or squash, or even 'making the scene' at a coffee bar or a party. Who knew what the evening held in store for us? I felt like we were living dangerously.

It was only when we were in the bus that we began to question what we were going to do with all this excess of time and spontaneity, to say nothing of the booze.

"Let's face it, we've got five and a half hours to kill," said Colin unenthusiastically.

"Well, what did you have in mind?" I said, my tone of voice bordering on the reproachful. After all, Colin had taken charge, as he usually did. I had assumed that he had everything planned out.

"For a start, I didn't know it would be so bloody cold." He was right. It was bloody cold. Edinburgh was always bloody cold but on this particular evening the knife-edged gusts of wind seemed unusually penetrating, and the raw damp air particularly chilling. The thought of trudging around dimly lit streets waiting for the magic hour of midnight while we slowly froze to the bone did not seem appealing. And for five and a half hours?!

"It's too bad we can't go into a nice warm pub somewhere," I said, not helping to resolve the situation. In fact, we probably could have gone to a pub and got away with it despite the fact that we were underage. It was Hogmany after all. However, living dangerously did not extend to wilfully breaking the law in our strict code of ethics. Besides, a pub represented other things as well. A pub was the other side of that thin line between adolescent and adult, a line that we hadn't quite crossed yet. In addition, a pub, especially in this part of Edinburgh, was frequented by working class people and there was no knowing how they would take to two middle-class, English-accented youngsters like Colin and I in their midst.

"I've got an idea," exclaimed Colin suddenly, interrupting my thoughts, "Let's go to Poole's and see a horror flick. By the time it's finished there'll only be about a couple of hours to midnight."

I agreed and we got off at the next stop, as we were already descending Lothian Road towards Princess Street. The idea appealed to me for several reasons. First and foremost, we would be out of the cold for two or three hours. Secondly, there was always a vicarious thrill at the prospect of seeing a horror film – something like 'The Pit and The Pendulum' which I had seen while at army camp in Pirbright. In addition, I had been wanting to go the Poole's Synod Hall Cinema for some time.

The building held memories for me. Opposite the doors leading into the balcony of the cinema there were rehearsal rooms, and it was to one of these rooms that I had gone religiously once a week, between the ages of eleven and thirteen. The purpose had been to play in Dr. Ruth and Dr. Mamie Waddell's orchestra. I had vivid memories of walking down the long corridor that separated the cinema from the rehearsal rooms. It was an incongruous sound environment. From one side emanated the eager but imperfect sounds of a string orchestra, bright young rosy-cheeked Edinburgh boys and girls pleasing their Mums on a Saturday morning. From the other side came a chilling blend of piercing screams, fiendish chuckles, and crashing music. It was drummed into us that the cinema was forbidden territory and that we should hasten down the corridor as quickly as possible, speaking to no-one, especially if they were coming from the cinema. On reflection, that corridor was probably a symbol and an omen - something to do with walking the thin line between high culture and low culture, the tight rope between discipline and desire, trying to steer a course between the piss and the pomp.

We sat down in our cosy retreat from the Edinburgh cold. The first film was 'The Return of Frankenstein'. It had its moments but it was really the second film, 'Dracula's Revenge', that got us going. Or maybe it was the effects of the second and third bottles of beer, which we were surreptitious imbibing out of paper cups. It was certainly a good combination. Count Dracula's bloodthirsty revenge became less horrifying and more comic by the minute.

It was about 10 o'clock when we left Poole's and set off towards the Royal Mile, that historic street in Edinburgh, known also as the High Street, which connects the castle and Holyrood Palace. We were now in a considerably better frame of mind and more than ready to face anything that Edinburgh's inclement weather might wish to throw at us.

"What are your parents doing tonight?" asked Colin, as he fished a package of five Embassy cigarettes out of his pocket.

"Oh, I don't know." They're at home of course, and mother's probably thinking of going to bed."

"Don't your parents see the New Year in?" asked Colin disbelievingly.

"No, not usually. My father might stay up and watch Andy Stewart and The White Heather Club on T.V." As I said this, I realised how glad I was to be out with Colin rather than sitting at home. The 'White Heather Club' was a T.V. program that featured Scottish Country dancing and Andy Stewart singing traditional Scottish songs. If the intention of the program was to stir up your Scottish pride, it had the reverse effect on me. It was so self-consciously 'Scottish'. So anxious to display the maximum amount of tartan and portray an atmosphere of revelry - one that always seemed to me totally artificial. As for Andy Stewart, the less said the better. Maybe it was just my bias against puffed-up little men again.

"Your father scares me." Colin said suddenly, breaking my train of thought. "He's so ...", Colin broke off, searching for the right word. "He's so intense."

"Well he likes you," I said ruefully. "He's always saying things like, "that Colin's a fine young man. I bet he knows where he's going in life. Tough little fellow, that Crabbie, he doesn't look as if he would stand for any nonsense."..."

"Your father says things like that?" Colin interjected, his eyebrows arched in surprise.

"Yes, he says things like that about other people. He would never say anything like that to me."

"My parents never say anything like that about anyone," his voice and face a curious mixture of reflection and alcoholic blariness.

"My father is always making comparisons to make one of us look bad. Sometimes it's the whole family. Sometimes he'll say something like, "why is it that no-one in this family ever laughs? When I was a boy, we laughed all the time. Aunty Margaret and her family are always laughing, and God knows with all their hardships, they don't have much to laugh about.""

As I was saying this, we reached the High Street and it was time to take stock of our situation. We could either turn left and go up towards the castle or else turn right and begin descending The Royal Mile towards our eventual destination, the Tron Kirk.

“Let’s go up to the esplanade,” I said emphatically. Colin glanced at me in surprise. He wasn’t used to me being the initiator. I was a bit surprised myself. On the few prior occasions that I had got tipsy, I had noticed a similar transformation, one in which I lost my hesitancy and self-doubt and became much more assertive and self-assured. Maybe that’s what Begley had meant about my having leadership qualities but being strangely reluctant to use them.

The castle esplanade was known territory to me which is probably why I had suggested going there. As a boy, my father had taken the family to see the military tattoo once a year, during the Edinburgh Festival. It had always been a moving experience. Unlike the ‘White Heather Club’ and its contrived T.V. studio atmosphere, the tattoo was a spectacular against the magnificent, floodlit backdrop of the castle. The ceremonial marches of the massed pipes and drums stirred genuine feelings of pride.

“Have you ever seen the lone piper?” I asked, as we entered the forefront of the castle esplanade. Colin was busy trying to get his cigarette lit, shielding it under the flap of his raincoat. I was thinking out aloud, at the sight of the castle battlements silhouetted against a wintry sky brought back more memories. The highpoint of the tattoo for me had always been the appearance of the lone piper high up on the battlements. A single spotlight focused on him as he played the traditional lament. It would be incorrect to say that this poignant moment stirred the Scottish blood in me, as in the case of the masses pipes and drums. The lament of the lone piper touched a more universal chord deep within me. The significance extended beyond nationalistic feelings or considerations. For me, it was as likely to resonate with a black man’s feelings as the pain and loneliness of Blues was integral to my white man’s soul.

Colin had run ahead of me and was now standing in the centre of the esplanade. Suddenly he threw his head back and started singing in a raucous voice, ‘Scots wha hae wha Wallace led, Scots wha hae wha Bruce hath bled, welcome to your gory bed and on to Victory’. It was appropriate. I joined in, and followed him as he marched to the top of the esplanade where on the other side of the moat the statues of Scotland’s two greatest heroes stood guard. As I approached Colin, I saw that he had taken the bottle of whisky out of his pocket and was taking his first swig. Suddenly, without warning, he jumped up on the balustrade that rose up at the side of the bridge over the moat. Clutching the bottle with one hand and holding out his other arm for balance, he began the precarious crossing. There was nothing I could do but hope for the best. Thankfully, he made it to the other side. Then, swaying in a most alarming way, he stood at the end of the balustrade facing Sir William Wallace and repeated one more chorus of ‘Scots wha Hae’.

“Och, the mon didna even thank me fer ma song,” Colin said as he jumped down. “Come on, let’s go into the park at the top of the Mound and get into this holy water here.” With his feat of daring-do, Colin had regained the initiative.

As we set off, I felt a combination of affection and frustration towards Colin, I liked and admired his gutsiness and colourful extroversion, but I never felt I could get really close to him.

There was too much competitiveness, too much challenging of ourselves and each other. I needed a friend with whom I could share feelings. At Sedbergh, this was no problem. There was John Aitken, and to a lesser extent David Lungley, Mark Hudson and Peter Wolf. But here, in Edinburgh, Colin was, by now, my only real friend. And it was in Edinburgh that I felt the greatest need to express my feelings. I also had the fear that Colin and I were beginning to drift apart. At Sedbergh, this had already happened, but in Edinburgh I felt more vulnerable because of the lack of other friends.

“What did you think of the game the other day?” I asked, attempting to re-open a conversation.

“What game?”

“Our game, against the Academy team.”

“Not much, we were better than them, that’s all.”

I was referring to a rugby game that had been played before Christmas between an ad hoc Sedbergh team that included Colin and I, and a team from The Edinburgh Academy that was largely

comprised of former team-mates of ours. For me, at any rate, it had been a strange experience -something akin to an immigrant returning to his roots, wanting both to somehow re-connect himself with his past and yet at the same time prove that he is different and better for having made the change.

It was shortly after eleven o'clock when we flopped down onto the grass at the top of the Mound. As we had turned off the High Street at Deacon Brodie's Tavern, the sounds of revelry from within indicated that the New Year was not far away. Here, in the shadow of the castle, it was quieter. Behind us was the facade of the Scottish Assembly, and below us lay the Scottish Art Gallery and the glittering lights of Princess Street. I knew it all and yet somehow it all seemed foreign to me. I was beginning to feel cold and estranged from my surroundings.

"Here, have a dram." Colin held out the bottle of whisky.

"I don't know." I hesitated. I had never drunk hard liquor before and it seemed like a big step. My mother's repeated story about how various black sheep in the family had become besotted on alcohol flashed through my mind.

"Come on, what's wrong with you? You look like you need it."

"O.K." I took the bottle and immediately recoiled from the smell. I could feel my stomach rebelling, and I hadn't even drunk anything yet. Thinking thoughts of 'come on Ian, be a man', and 'if Colin can do it, so can you', I steeled my insides and took a quick swig. The part where it passed over my taste-buds and went down my throat was terrible, but the after-glow that spread through my body like wild-fire was wonderful.

"Good stuff, eh?" said Colin as he took the bottle back. "Not as good as Crabbie's 'Green Ginger', of course." The reference was to a famous liqueur that was produced by a company owned and managed by the Crabbie family.

"You know what?" he continued abruptly, as if he was about to announce something to the world. "I'm going to get fucked this year, I know it."

Who was I to dispute his utter certainty? "Good for you," I muttered unenthusiastically.

"I nearly had it with this girl Fiona that I met at a party just before Christmas. She brought me off with her hand, and she let me put my finger inside her. God, she was really wet, sopping in fact. Oh, and her breasts! She took off her bra and let me suck her breasts. Her nipples got all hard. Jesus, they were ... they were huge!"

Colin took another swig from the bottle as he relived what had obviously been a peak experience. Meanwhile my thoughts were bordering on the murderous. 'And her lips, and her hair, and her shoulder blades, and her left elbow, and her right big toe, and .... that's right Colin, go on rub it in ... give us the whole list. Think I want to hear about it when I haven't even got to the breast stage?!'

"By the way, how are things going with you?"

'Curse you, Crabbie,' I thought to myself, 'you must have read my thoughts.'

"Oh, not so good ... have I told you what's been happening with Pam lately?"

"No ... I mean yes, at least, no, but not now, O.K.?"

God, why did I have to be so honest? I just set myself up. I could have just replied something like, 'it's going pretty well,' and left it at that. I could have been mysterious about the thing. If he'd pressed me for details, I could have even lied. But then again, I couldn't and wouldn't.

"Give me the bottle." I snapped out of my own thoughts. I didn't care any more. I wasn't going to listen to Colin's exploits any more. I wasn't going to entertain any more thoughts about what a lonely place Edinburgh was, I wasn't going to think about my parents or the Army, or Physics and Chemistry, or even dear old Sedbergh. I was going to get drunk, really drunk.

Half an hour later Colin and I were standing in the square beside the Tron Kirk. Everything was swimming. All I knew was that I was a part of a jostling, excited crowd. I no longer felt estranged. I was no longer self-conscious about my English accent. I wasn't even aware of myself as a separate entity. I was one

of them. I was one of the masses. As the church bells began to strike midnight, I was an integral part of this collective consciousness as it counted off each peal.

“Seven ... eight ... nine ... ten ... eleven ... HAPPY NEW YEAR!”

And suddenly, this great Protestant gathering broke into a huge cheer. Bottles were passed back and forth, greetings exchanged, and then, to my amazement, I noticed men and women, complete strangers, hugging and kissing each other. Even in my swaying, stupefied condition, I registered that in Edinburgh, this could only happen on Hogmany, and this could surely only happen with the aid of the bottle. But it was wonderful. It was marvelous. I wasn't going to question it. I was part of it. So I joined in, indiscriminately hugging and kissing any woman I saw. It felt like I was going around in a circle. It seemed as if I was kissing some of the same people more than once. But it didn't matter.

Everything was in a whirl. I was on a roundabout. I was on a roller coaster, everything swimming crazily before my eyes. It was as if each time I completed the circle of kissing and hugging, another inner layer of inhibitions and injunctions was stripped away. I was getting carried away, swept away. I had lost my center of gravity. Vague, confused thoughts crossed my mind; ‘that old hag I just kissed must have been at least eighty!’ ... ‘it's so easy’ ... ‘why can't it be this easy with girls normally?’ ... ‘my God, she didn't even have any teeth’ ... ‘where did Colin get to?’ ... ‘I think I'm beginning to feel sick’. But I couldn't stop. Around I went, around and around. I heard someone say, “oh, not you again, this must be the third time at least.” The spell was beginning to break. Most of the crowd had drifted away. The New Year had been born. It had been duly celebrated. It was time to sober up. Only one year to go ‘till the next New Year. But I didn't want to stop. I didn't want the roundabout to grind to a halt. I dug into my pocket and took out the bag of coal that I had brought along just in case we did any ‘first-footing’ (coal, black bun and whisky being the traditional gifts). I was trying to persuade some stranger to take a piece of coal by demonstrating to him how good they were to suck when I became aware of a looming presence beside me.

“You'd better go on home now, laddie.” The Edinburgh Constabulary was making its presence felt.

Normally such a bastion of Authority would have had me scurrying into line in no time flat. But in my present state his domed hat and dark blue uniform didn't cut much ice.

“Who are you to tell me what to do?” was my chief thought.

“Oh come on officer, I'm just having a wee bitty fun. Would ye care for a piece of coal?” I intoned in my best Stockbridge accent.

“I'm not joking, son. It's time for you to go home.”

“But ... “

“RIGHT NOW!!”

It finally filtered through to my better judgment that the gentleman had really been quite tolerant and that I had better not strain his patience any more. I looked around for Colin and saw him about to disappear down an ally. I shouted to him and he waited still I was close.

“I'm just going for a piss,” he said testily.

“I feel sick,” I said feeling vary strange sensations in my stomach.

“Well, you'd better go home then. I'm off over the Bridges.” Colin seemed impatient and irritated. He also appeared to be in not much better shape than me. But whatever his reasons for wanting to go to the east end of Princess Street were of no interest to me at that moment. I just wanted to get home.

We stumbled off in different directions without saying goodbye. I could feel a rising sensation in my stomach. I was by now blind drunk and I had really no idea how to get home. However some strange and primitive homing instinct seemed to take over and I set off in the right direction. Just before I got to the Meadows, I began vomiting. All I can remember from there until the time I reached my front door was a series of dull thuds and vaguely registered pain as I tripped and fell, or else walked into a lamp-posts, this being interspersed with a regular rhythm of vomiting.

I had only two concerns as I stood at my front door. How to get the bloody key into the lock, and how to get into my bed without crashing over anything and waking my parents.

The next morning, I awoke to discover a series of gory reminders of the evening before. My head was splitting, there were grazes on my face and bloody bruises and cuts on my arms and legs. In addition, one arm of my raincoat was covered with dried vomit. The stench of vomit seemed everywhere. But by some miracle, my parents didn't discover what had happened, or if they knew anything, they kept quiet.