



## DAY MINUS ONE - AND COUNTING

I write this on the eve of our journey into darkest Speyside, not knowing whether we will ever see civilisation, or even Cruden Bay, again.

There is no telling what dangers we may meet on the way; however my misgivings are perhaps ill-founded, for I have the assurance that I am indeed in the company of a most intrepid band of explorers - not least Derek the Butcher, who has been wearing in his walking shoes the 200 yards to work each morning, AND behind the counter - and also a formidable-sounding personage known simply as Big Tam.

Nevertheless, I fear greatly for the life of my good friend Barrikins Harper of Glenafton. Heroically disregarding the well-intentioned advice of friends and neighbours, and brushing aside the whimperings and pleadings of Helen his wife, he has in a fit of reckless bravery donned his gaiters and is sleeping in them this very night in readiness for the morrow. Indeed, he fully intends to complete the journey, despite recent painful surgery involving the amputation of his armchair. He is an example to us all!

## DAY ONE

8.15 a.m. - We assemble at the Killie but it is shut. Our transport arrives and we pile in - myself and Alison in the front, the men of The Lodge wedged in the back of the van, their jocular remarks barely masking the edge of fear in their voices as they journey into unknown dangers, a blister pack and a Mars Bar apiece being all that stands between them and certain discomfort.

Barry clutches his bag of cheese rolls to his chest ("Remember to share them with your friends", Helen had said), as he tries in vain to recall the cheering ditties of his ancestor Bilgo Baggins.

An hour into the journey and morale is low. Jim Connor feels car-sick and has crawled to a position near the front, where he hangs dangerously over our shoulders making convulsive gulping motions in his throat. He is soon joined by Big Tam and Barry.

Someone comments that it looks like the Wallies' Outing with the three of them hanging over the front with opening and shutting mouths.

Barry has developed a blister.

And then, without warning, a most terrible stench permeates the interior of the van.

Someone has farted.

This was an unforeseen hazard.

Big Tam is greatly annoyed as he has been doing his modest best to convey the impression that he is nothing less than a gentleman. "For Christ's sake, A wus haudin' on tae mine!", he protests. However, he now lets it go in retaliation.

I fear we may not reach Spey Bay alive.

We have arrived at Spey Bay. Our band of desperados disembarks, and we prepare to undertake our mission to plummet new depths of depravity where no man, or even Mason, has been before.

We soon walk into the small hamlet of Fochabers and enter the Gordon Arms, where we partake of a few pints and a hearty lunch. Greatly cheered, we set off for Craigellachie. - - - -

However, there is something amiss with Gordon's navigational skills because after walking about a mile, we find ourselves facing the same pub again. It could be that he possesses a certain homing instinct.

This may cause us problems, I fear.

Taking our bearings again, we move on upstream until we reach Boat-o-Brig, and here we encounter our first real obstacle.

There would appear to be a hill in the way, completely blocking our path.

We were unprepared for this.

We exchange astonished looks. "Anybody want a cheese roll?", asks Barry.

However, Gordon manages to spur us on by saying that Craigellachie is "just roond the corner", and so we begin our ascent. But there are mutinous mutterings from Big Tam as he toils uphill in his golf shoes, three pairs of heavy denim jeans stuffed into the constraints of his son's schoolbag which strains on his broad back like a throbbing pimple.

His pain translates to anger, which is in turn focused on Gordon McEye, the roving cameraman, who is taking a sadistic pleasure in recording his brother's suffering.

"See you an' that f\*cking camera," wheezes Tam, "A'm goin tae stuff it up yer arse!"

Gordon, being a practical sort of chap, can see little advantage in this, other than the interesting possibility that he could then see where he had been.

As the day wears on and I filter through to the back, I find myself stuck with Barry's whinging.

"Why am I here?", he sobs.

"Helen says that if they were dishing out shit, I'd be in the queue for my share."

"Just give me the shit - sprinkle it with a wee bit of sugar and it'll go down fine - if I can just go home."

And then he pulls out a photo of his slippers and breaks down in wild uncontrollable sobs at the side of the road.

We plod on. I do not normally derive pleasure in witnessing the suffering of a fellow human being, but for some reason the sight of my neighbour's chubby little face contorted in agony, and his normally modest strides decreasing to a barely visible shuffle, cause me to fall about in a fit of cackling. If he could spare the energy, I think he would like to hit me.

Further up in the front, Big Tam waddles on, a broken man now, shirt hanging out, schoolbag trailing in the dust. "It's just roond this corner" - Gordon keeps him going with lie after lie.

We shamble into Craigellachie and find that our lodgings can only be reached by climbing a steep flight of steps cut into a bank. There are whimpers of dismay. Has anyone brought a tent?

Craigellachie Lodge is a lovely large house with huge deep baths and gallons of piping hot water.

The snorers, Barry and Tam, are diluted among the company, one each in a room of three, and I have a camp bed in Gordon and Alison's room.

Blisters and aches are attended to. Derek proudly displays his whopper blisters to his room-mates who emerge wide-eyed to tell the tale, indicating the size like boasting anglers.

We descend the steps again to the Avon Hotel, and feast and drink of the liquor there. There is a lone accordion who cheerfully plays our requests, and soon we are singing along to Flower of Scotland, aches and pains forgotten.

Roger is set upon by a sprightly young thing celebrating her 60th birthday - she has obviously been taken in by his rugged macho appearance - however she receives a nasty shock when he rises to escort her in a dance, he hobbles onto the floor like an ailing octogenarian.

Tam relates a lurid tale about the sexual exploits of Pinnochio. Is nothing sacred?

Arriving back at the digs, we are trying to suppress our snorts and titters when we are greeted by the landlady - who is totally smashed herself!

## DAY TWO

Gordon, Alison and I sit down for breakfast. One by one, the others shuffle in bleary-eyed from lack of sleep and complaining bitterly about Barry and Tam's snoring. Then the door swings open and in stride the two offenders, full of gusto and bounce, and ready for a hearty breakfast after a good night's sleep. Tucking happily into their bacon and eggs, they are entirely oblivious to the stony glares of their exhausted room-mates.

Taking our leave of Craigellachie, we follow an old railway track the mile or so to Aberlour. To while away the time, Tam relates a charming anecdote about Ian Paisley's good lady wife.

Roger proves to have a quarter-bottle of whisky concealed about his person. I could see from the start that he was an organised sort of chap when it became obvious that he had brought more than one pair of socks.

In Aberlour, we are waylaid by a fellow Mason and friend of Gordon's into the Station Bar - well, any friend of Gordon's is a drinking partner of ours.

There is some speculation as to the outcome of the Grand National, and then Gordon pulls a rubber snake out of his rucksack. It is strange what an apparently sane man will take with him into the unknown, on a perilous journey where every ounce of extra weight can mean the difference between survival and death.

However, the item seems to be some sort of talisman which he uses from time to time against Alison. This he now demonstrates by flinging it in her direction, whereupon she shrieks wildly and clutches in terror at the arm of the bewildered Tam who, for once, had neither done nor said anything out of place, and had been minding his own business and musing to himself upon the soaring price of Vaseline.

The snake is eventually retrieved and stowed away for use on a later occasion, and Gordon sits back with a rather satisfied expression on his face.

Leaving Aberlour, we rejoin the old railway track. Jim Conner waits until he hears a vehicle approaching and then relieves himself in it's path, in full view of the rather haughty woman driving. But then, Jim is from Edinburgh.

Four miles on, we stop at Carron for another pint, and then it's another seven miles to go to Ballindalloch.

We are still on the railway track, and the walking is quite flat and monotonous, as mile follows mile.

The sun is beating down, and Tam is in a bad way again. When told that he should really acquire a proper rucksack for the next time, he growls dangerously:

"A'm tellin ye, for the 100th f\*cking time, there's no goin tae be a next time - - - A'd rather hae forty lashes ower the foreskin wi a knotted dandelion."

The vivid mental imagery conjured up by this heartfelt statement is really quite mind-blowing, and these words will surely go down in legend.

Falling back, I speak with Derek and ask after his coveted blisters. He says, "My feet are nae sae bad, but ma hips are sair."

I ponder upon this.

Far be it from me to tell him that if he ties his hiking boots to his rucksack and allows them to dangle about his bum, then he WILL have sore hips.

A small dug picks up our trail.

Doug's old football injury is playing up, and Barry digs into his First Aid Kit and comes out with a sling. Doug looks a bit confused because it's his ankle that's sore, but says nothing because obviously Barry knows a thing or two about survival in The Wilds.

We are picked up at The Phone Box, which is the main landmark in Ballindalloch, and ferried to our digs. Doug, Jim, Roger and Derek go to Ardvich, and the rest of us to The Corries.

Big Tam and Barry are to share a room - a form of divine justice dished out by their fellow Masons who have had enough of their snoring. Away to ask Barry for a pin from his infinite First Aid Kit, I chance to walk in when they are in a state of undress. There is a squeal from Tam as he scrabbles for a towel, but it pains me to say that I saw nothing of note.

What had apparently been happening was that Barry, having developed a rather painful rear, had asked Tam for a wee shottie of his Vaseline. Concerned that his friend should not be ignorant of the full extent of the damage, Tam had said, "Dae ye want tae see whit it looks like?" And before the bewildered Barry could reply in the negative, Tam had displayed his inflamed nether regions in a manner that would put an enraged baboon to shame.

Now I know that Barry has a very weak stomach, and faints at the sight of a plook being lanced on "Your Life in Their Hands", and he looks decidedly peaky as he sits down to his venison stew.

George, our landlord, kindly lends us his car, and Tam drives us all to the pub. The Ballindalloch Hotel is a posh affair, with designs on the trade of the hunting/shooting fraternity. However, business is not exactly booming, and the lonely landlord welcomes our motley band with an air of resigned hospitality, says we can eat the peanuts if we wish, and allows us to occupy chairs intended for better people, where we slurp our lager and guffaw at lewd jests.

Barry and I phone Helen and tell her about Barry borrowing Tam's Vaseline for his bum, but she is an understanding sort, and accepts that there are certain masonic rituals about which it is wisest not to ask. In fact, she doesn't seem in the least surprised.

Alison enters into a heated debate with Roger about sex discrimination and male chauvinism. Roger reflects that he had better not ask her to wash his socks after all.

I happen to tell Alison about the snake I saw today.

This proves to be a mistake.

Back to the digs for some shut-eye.

### DAY THREE

Gordon is woken early by strange vibrations causing the dressing table to rattle and plaster to fall from the ceiling.

Tracing the source of the disturbance to the room below, he loads his camera to record Barry and Tam's outlandish sleeping habits.

Their snoring being perfectly synchronised, the door to their room swings to a fro with the fluctuation in the volume of air. As Gordon edges downstairs he is caught unawares and almost sucked into the vacuum.

At breakfast, both Barry and Tam grumble that they neither slept a wink all night due to the other's snoring.

George, the landlord, drives us down to Ardvich to rejoin the rest of our party, and relieves us of our rucksacks for the day.

And so we begin our trek to Tomintoul. Alison is convinced that this is prime snake territory, and sets a cracking pace. The track becomes clogged with snow, and soon our feet are wet.

Descending into Glenlivet, our spirits are flagging, when someone spots a hostelry up ahead. Everyone is happy again. But the glee is short lived - the place is shut. I observe a large round tear form in Derek's eye, slide down his cheek and land with a hiss and a sizzle on the toe of his boot.

Our plight is noted by a passing native who sympathetically informs us that there is a pub a half a mile further on. We break into a run.

In the bar, the talk turns to the relative sizes of the seven brothers' leisure apparatus. In the end it is decided that a visual comparison is really the only way to resolve the issue: "We lay them a' up on the bar, an the shortest tadger buys a roond."

The barman shifts uncomfortably at the thought of such a display of a Sunday lunchtime, but he is saved by Jim Connor who has given in gracefully. "Jist set them up, I'm buying", he says in a sad, resigned sort of way.

Just before we leave, Tam decides that his sore bits require another application of Vaseline, so he unzips his breeks, takes a dollop of the stuff out of it's much depleted tub, and proceeds to lather it on.

Gordon McEye, the roving cameraman, never one to miss an opportunity of some good footage (or even inchage), whips out his camera and starts filming the incident. Tam is suddenly taken by a late fit of modesty and turns his back to continue. But Gordon is not to be outdone, and creeping up behind, pokes his camera between Tam's legs.

"See that f\*cking camera!"

The barman, mopping his fevered brow, bids us farewell in a shaky sort of voice, and we embark rejuvenated on the final stage of our journey - the last hill before Tomintoul.

A gradually steepening climb, during which Barry starts his whinging again.

Alison and I have discovered a New Word which was hitherto unknown to us. It begins with 'f', and comprises four letters, and would seem to be in common usage outside our own sheltered existences.

Alison plans to introduce it into her vocabulary without delay, and on her next visit to the butcher shop intends to ask Derek for "a pound of f\*cking sausages, please".

Coffee and hot chocolate on the summit, windswept group photographs ("Will ye f\*cking smile!"), and then we begin our descent towards Tomintoul. Yomping awhile through thigh-high snowdrifts (Barry is up to his top-knot), and then on through miles of peat bog. 'Desperado' Doug Sheal doesn't give a damn anymore about staying dry, and just ploughs on through thick brown sludge up to his knees. What will Shiela say about his socks?

Derek feels a loud 'pop' in the region of his big toe, and believes the cause to be an exploding blister.

We reach the outskirts of Tomintoul - Congratulations all round, and then its off to the pub again.

Walking through the lofty village, we feel like conquering heroes, but we probably look more like a dishevelled band of outlaws come down from the hills to give ourselves up to the Law.

In the pub, everyone is in high spirits - everyone that is, except Tam. He stands in the corner, head bent, a shadow of his former self - lighter by a few pounds, three golf tees, three-quarters of a tub of Vaseline, and the entire epidermis of his groin area.

Jimmy Gardiner and Karen arrive with something which, on close inspection, turns out to be a small dog.

The scene which greets them in the bar is not a pleasant one: several of the company have by now removed their boots; socks hang steaming over the fire; and through the putrid fog thus created, it is just possible to make out the following:

Doug with black flaking rings of peat bog all the way up to his knees, Barry picking at his blisters, Roger wringing his socks out from a great height - and Tam, slithering about in a pool of Vaseline.

Jimmy views us with some distaste.

We have our tea, everyone phones their wives, and then we all board the van. Jim Connor sits up front with The Hound of the Baskervilles leering over his shoulder and, to appease his conscience about taking the best available seat, asks Barry from time to time if he is alright. Everyone thanks him for his touching concern, replying that we are all alright.

The road to Ballindalloch seems long. We'd have been quicker to walk.

We stop at 'The Corries' for our rucksacks, and are there reinforced with a large malt. Back into the van then, and it's bawdy songs with Gordon ad-libbing the lyrics.

And then there is a groan from the long-suffering Tam, as he realises that the air has gone from his bit of the airbed.

The curious thing is that Barry and Dougie are sitting on one side of him, and myself of the other, and our portions remain fully inflated.

Tam cannot understand this. Someone unfeelingly says that it is because he is such a fat b\*st\*rd, but Tam prefers to believe that he has been somehow singled out by Forces Unknown to be the hapless victim of endless persecution.

Eventually, Tam and I change seats. "Ah, that's better", he sighs.....

It would be dreadful if the cork popped out again.....

There is an audible hiss of air, a howl of dismay, and Tam sinks again to a lower level. His bewilderment is almost touching.

Roger informs us that he is the proud owner of some boiled egg holders. This causes an embarrassed silence. We all possess a few egg-cups, but we don't talk about them all that much. Maybe he is very poor.

In the Killie, we take a pint together, and say fond farewells, as everyone goes their separate ways at the end of our marathon pub crawl.

Russell drives Barry and I up to 'Glenafton', and we have coffee with Helen. Barry looks in on his slippers and breathes a happy little sigh.

Strange. He appears to have shrunk. I think he has ingrowing legs.