

Robert the Bruce

'Slap some meaty pellets in ye bowl, a tablet for ye belly in there too...' Grant twirled his great Sottish bulk around the kitchen, holding a dog bowl full of food.

The dog bounced up and down around him, tongue lolling and eyes wide. Drool hung from the jowls of the Boxer. A Boxer mixed with God knows what.

An old Nokia rang on the dining table across the room. Grant slid the bowl across the floor and the dog got its nose into it.

'Here ye go Robbie,' said Grant, 'get stuck in. Bloody phone. If that's them soppo bastards about my pension I'll-' he stopped muttering to himself and straightened his back, stiff after a night's sleep.

He crossed the room to his phone, which was vibrating its way to the edge of the table.

'Aye?' he said, holding it to his ear.

'Grant, love. It's Beryl.'

'Beryl? I thought we were speaking later,' he turned his wrist and looked at it. Bare. Back on the kitchen unit Grant saw his watch, 'hell, hang on.'

'Grant, stop. I want to tell you something. I want you to listen.'

'Aye?' he said.

'Cancer,' she let it hang, 'I've got cancer, blooming nerve of it. Anyway, they don't think I've got long love, look, I-'

The descending tone of three beeps sounded in Grant's ear.

The call dropped, and she was gone.

'I need to speak to my wife. What? Beryl McDonald. Aye then, ex-wife, it's all the same to me ye great slab o'meat. Look here, the damned call to Scotland's nae working. What? I'm in Western Australia, ye cannae tell? Chrissakes, you're testing my patience laddie, have a wee bit o'bollocks and put me through to someone who can... hallo?' Grant Armstrong looked at his phone after the call cut off. Second time in a day. The display said he'd been on twenty-seven minutes.

'Bastards,' he hissed through his teeth.

He shook the chunky old handset, imagining the whole call centre was in there, with all the headsets falling, monitors crashing from the desk and agents tossed from chairs.

Have that ye smarmy pricks.

Grant looked up and saw Robert The Bruce watching him. Deep brown irises followed his movements.

'Ye think I'm a wee bit mental, aye Robbie?'

Robbie wagged his tail, yawned a tall yawn, and turned his back on Grant. He curled himself up into a ball on his pink trim bed and was soon asleep.

Grant scraped a solitary chair across the floor, away from the kitchen table, and sat down. The noise caused Robert The Bruce to raise an eyebrow which rested as soon as it had risen. The dog's eyes rolled back, and he slept.

Grant grabbed his heavy laptop and pulled it forward, flipping it open as he did.

Behind the shortcut icons, hazy under the light from the kitchen window, was the wallpaper photograph of him and Beryl. Younger then and slimmer, almost athletic. His lip raised by a red, weathered cheek.

Beryl had that impish beauty, small but full of music.

Grant clicked on the Google icon and opened a window. In the search bar he typed, "Flights Perth to Glasgow".

His eyes scoured the information.

'These computers are bastards,' he said, his top lip pulled back over his teeth, 'is this is what they want, to give you a bleeding heart attack?'

The dog's back legs stretched out, long and easy, back and front, extending the spine, then recoiling.

Grant clicked on the top result.

When was the last time he saw Beryl, ten years? Is that what it was now? He thought about it as he scribbled down the address of the local Telstra shop. Yes, he remembered, he'd left Scotland in 2008. It was like it had happened in last night's dream. Not real, but recent enough to believe.

'I'll adapt,' she'd said, waiting for the check-in desk to open, 'adapt to not having your barky moods around the place, you Big Bampot.'

She had smiled when she said it, her head poking out of her big thick coat. But her eyes gave her away, trembling and wet.

He'd wanted to shake her, just like the phone, and rattle some sense into her. *You're losing me!* He'd thought, *I'm off, and ye still can't tell me to stay!*

Beryl closed the gap between herself and her husband, taking small feathered steps like a bird. She held her cold hand to his face, and he turned his mouth and kissed the palm. Grant held his hand to Beryl's cheek in return, it was warm and large. Blood boiled in this man.

'Come with me love, I have ye ticket' he said.

'You know I can't. You shouldn't be going, not now, why can't you-'

'Och!' he snapped.

He turned away from his wife and raised his fist, rubbing his knuckles into his sore scalp, just like he always did when he lost control. As he ground them in he knocked off the wide-brimmed hat that had rested on his head.

He muttered one of his Daddy's curse words under his breath and spun round. The hat lay in front of him.

Spondylitis flared up and his body creased over. Through his scrunched eyelids, Grant looked down at his hat on the speckled terrazzo floor.

The hat was Blue Pantone and Red Pantone, that was the colours they'd said. *Bloody idiots! It's just blue and red*, he smirked to himself.

Sewn into the red crown were the words "I Love Oz".

The pain eased, and he pincered the novelty hat between his finger-tips. The chatter in the terminal reminded him there were people all about, so he straightened up, wincing privately, and put the hat back on his head. He turned and Beryl had disappeared.

He remembered the moment, alone and cold in his wattle-gold football shirt and gumtree-green shorts. His beloved Glasgow soon to disappear behind the grey clouds.

He remembers the blank space left by his departed wife.

Grant unlocked and opened the metal gun cabinet and took the gun.

'Come on boy,' he commanded, but Robert The Bruce didn't come.

He slotted the shells into the loading flap of the shotgun until they clicked. Again, again, filling the tube.

'I tell ye what Robbie, you better come, I'm sick of being pushed around by pricks these days, it's time to stick things up 'em. Come on, laddie.'

Robbie looked at his master but didn't move.

Grant folded over the paper with the Telstra address and stuffed it into his pocket.

The barrel of the gun was bobbing and unsure under Grant's arm. It pointed in the direction of Robbie.

He reached into his pocket with his free hand and pulled out some biltong.

The dog jumped up and wagged his tail and snatched the biltong between his teeth. It was tough and salty and his entire world was the biltong.

They left together, the promise of more dried meat wafting from Grant's pocket, the gun dancing in his arms.

'Fucking piece of shit!' screamed Grant, turning the key to the ute for the fourth time. He banged his fists on the plastic steering wheel of the Triton. Hammering it again and again.

The shotgun lay on his lap.

Robert The Bruce licked Grant's hairy ear, gathering salt from the sweat.

Grant thought of Beryl again.

"Haven't got long," she'd said.

His body convulsed from his stomach right up to his nose. A tear threatened to roll down his cheek. It was almost like he sucked the tear back into the duct in an act of stubbornness. He wiped his face with his sleeve to make sure there wasn't a trace.

The phone rang, and he answered, snorting a river of snot back up his nostrils that sent a piggish sound down the receiver.

'Aye?' he said.

'Good news sir, we have fixed your international call plan. You can now catch up with your friends, all over the world, whenever you-' Grant cut the man off.

He dialled another number, and it rang for almost a minute. Then a friendly, soft voice said, 'Hullo?'

'Ted? Put Beryl on,' said Grant.

'Hullo Grant, she's having an afternoon kip. Can I give her a message?'

'Put her on the phone ye daft poof.'

'Ok Grant, I know you've had a shock, we've all had-'

'Tell her I'm coming home... For good. Flights booked and I'm leaving tomorrow, I'll be back in Glasgow by Thursday. Got a spare bed?'

'We don't need you here, Grant. She's not your wife now, she's actually-look, the phone calls, I've been meaning to speak to you-' said Ted, before Grant cut in again.

'She natters on to me every time I call, Teddy. She'll have me back in a flash and ye know it, ye sparrow legged little gobshite.'

'She worries about you Grant, that's all. I'm going to hang up now. Cancel your flight and I'll pass your message on.' said Ted, twisting his bottom in the telephone table seat, and replacing the receiver with a *ping*.

'Nobody hangs up on-' began Grant, tailing off as a fly landed on his nose, 'oh piss off,' he snapped, slapping himself across the nostrils.

He slung the shotgun onto the passenger seat, screwed up the Telstra address and chucked it into the foot well with the cans and fast food wrappers.

Grant couldn't believe he'd loaded it. What was he going to do, use it?

'Change of plan, Robbie,' he said looking in the back seat, but avoiding those eyes, 'change of plan.'

He turned the key again, and the diesel compressed and ignited.

The day is getting late. The ute is empty of life, but for the smell of fur and old sweat, the air cooling after a drive under the afternoon sun. It went as far as it could, weaving between the Jarrah and the Marri and the Wandoo. Scattered across the passenger seat are leaflets plastered with pictures of dogs and cats and big smiles. Beside these is a piece of paper with the names of animal shelters. The writing is careful, and each name has a straight line crossed through it. Underneath the list a scrawled word, "FULL", a full stop stabbed through the paper next to it. The shotgun is not in the vehicle and two doors remain open wide. You can hear the echo of warning calls, made by birds unsettled by engine sounds. A noise which followed the man and the dog a little deeper into the bush.

Tied to a tree is Robert The Bruce.

He's finished scrabbling and sniffing and pulling. Now he just lies on his front, panting from his efforts. He is dewy-eyed and the tongue bobs in and out, capturing the shade and breeze.

How hard to shoot a face like that.

Grant is pacing. Twigs and leaves snapping and crunching under foot. He's sobbing. This Big Bastard Scotsman out in the Great Southern Australian bush with a shotgun gripped in both hands like a young soldier who *has* just shot someone. Grant's fight is with his breath, hoarse and irregular.

He thinks of Beryl, thinks of Ted (Fucking Ted!).

Anything but Robbie.

Just do it. Just turn and do it. Pull the trigger, you Scottish prick!

He turns, he aims the gun and Robbie's eyelids drop and you can't see those beautiful eyes anymore. Time passes, a freeze frame of a man's shaking rage and a dog's quietness. A clicking noise as Grant loads a bullet into the chamber.

And then the frame shatters.

A loud and familiar sound.

The deep, grinding snore of Robert The Bruce.

A surprise squeak comes from Grant's throat and he lets go of the gun and runs to his dog, dropping to his knees and cradling him. Robbie just lifts one eyelid, revealing a rolled back and bloodshot eye.

'Oh my love,' says Grant, 'I'm breaking a promise to ye mate. I cannae shoot ye, I'm so sorry, laddie. I'm so sorry, but I can't take ye with me. I can't, Beryl's dying, the bloody woman's dying laddie. Ye'll be fine, ye'll be fine.'

Grant sat with Robbie sleeping in his arms and watched the sunlight dapple through the leaves that rustled into the early evening.

The phone rang. *It never bleeding stops.*

'Mr. Armstrong?'

'Aye?'

'We have a space for Robbie.'

Perth airport. Grant is early and checked in on time. There has been no conflict. It all seems to have worked. His phone, the man at the desk (*I wouldn't go near those bloody self check-in machines*). The steps between the escalators even loosened up his back.

He's looking at a money pouch made from a Kangaroo scrotum. It reminded him of Robbie, but he blinked and erased the image as quick as it came. Well practiced. He takes hold of the pouch and rubs his thumb over its smooth skin. Maybe Beryl would like it. Maybe Ted! Maybe Grant could gift him a couple of balls in it. He chuckled and noticed people were looking at him. Those sideways looks. He replaced the novelty gift.

His phone rang in his pocket, sending a vibration up his leg. He answered.

'Aye?' he said. He knew it was Beryl. Her name flashed up on the screen. But he liked to pretend he didn't know.

'Grant, it's Beryl. How are you love?' she said, and then there was a long and dull pause, 'I know Ted, I know, let me be will you, you Big Highlander. Go on, go. Sorry Grant my love, where are you darling?'

'He's gone?'

'Aye love, Ted's popping the kettle on.'

'I'm looking at Kangaroo scrotums in Perth airport,' said Grant, whispering the word *scrotums*.

'Well I never. I'm watching the cuckoo clock you bought me. Remember, you got it when we bought the house. You were proud as punch for a day, and then you said it was a blooming nuisance, and I had to hide your tools until you swore you wouldn't take it down.'

'I never took it down Beryl.'

'I know love.'

'Ted wouldn't even know how to take it down. He'd probably cut himself on the bloody beak,' said Grant.

He walked out of the shop and stood tight in a corner, his face nearly touching the wall. Airport privacy. He massaged his eyes with his thumb and fingers, trying to contain what was welling up inside.

'Ted is going to look after me, love. He'll take good care of me.' Said Beryl, drawing on a little of the strength she'd stored away over the years.

'I'm coming all the way round the world to be with ye Beryl, doesn't that mean anything?'

'You went half way round the world to get away from me.'

'You left the airport. I looked for ye, but ye'd gone.'

'You looked like a big, blooming daftie in your Aussie yellows and greens!'

They laughed, but it left a trail of sadness.

'I'm wearing the Scottish footy strip now, and the jester hat.'

'You're a fool, Grant Armstrong! A giant fool.'

'Aye. Well,' Grant sighed and swept his hand across his head, slipping the blue and white jester hat off. The bell tinkled, 'I wasn't leaving you, my love. I was trying to leave me.'

'I know,' said Beryl.

'Didn't work though, did it?'

'Where's Robbie?'

Grant turned and faced the crowd of people that pinged about the shopping court. Everyone in a rush to get somewhere. A change of scene, a rest, an adventure. All wanting to get away. He leaned back onto the plain white wall and laid his head against it.

'Robbie's in a shelter, love,' then the tears came, they shook out of him, 'I let him down Beryl.'

'Oh, Grant.'

'I can't come home,' said Grant, 'I need to look after young Robbie. He doesn't know any better, love. I told him, but he doesn't understand. He just looked at me, watched me go all the way down the road. I could see him in the ute mirror. Those big bloody eyes! Just watching me, the soft bastard.'

'He loves you, that dog,' said Beryl.

'I'll ring ye, I will nae stop that love.'

'Honest injun?' replied Beryl, a tear breaking free, quiet in the wrinkles of her cheek.

'Aye love. Every day, just like normal. You make sure that Ted looks after ye, otherwise I WILL come home. And I'll bring Robert The Bruce with me'

'He's a good one is Ted, love.'

'Aye, I know,' said Grant, already shuffling back down the stairs, dragging his sleeve across his wet cheeks and pulling at the boarding card jammed into his wallet.

Grant's voice boomed across the terminal, sweeping across the heads of tourists, attracting everyone's attention.

'Get my bag back ye soppo old Sherpa! I'm nae going today! Sorry love, I'll call ye, I got to go. Robbie'll go like a hotcake with them big brown eyes, God love him. Stop the conveyor belt!'

'I'll let you go then love.' Said Beryl, hanging up the phone and taking the cup of tea from the waiting Ted, 'thanks love,' she said to her husband, 'he'll be alright.'

'I know,' said Ted.

Later that day Jim, a seventeen-year-old volunteer, was moving bags of dog pellets from the store room to the front of the animal welfare office. It was his first day on the job and he was whistling away to himself. He was going to vet school soon and was in a ripper mood.

It was a peaceful place, for those that found the sound of dogs and cats peaceful.

Then, as he got to the office counter, the door burst open.

The silhouette of a man filled the frame. He stood firm with arms wide, features hidden by the bleaching sunshine behind.

'Hello sir?' stammered the young boy, 'can I help you?'

'Aye,' said the figure, 'I'm here for Robert The Bruce!'