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Doubting Thomas

Hamish McGee

The Summer of 1969, when I was Endiku and my younger brother was Gilgamesh, was a time enjoyed by everyone but me. School holidays for most eight year-olds in rural Scotland were an adventure, but for me, it was a sentence.

“Life’s what you make it son,” my dad would say if I moaned about being bored. Then he’d sit back and carry on reading the paper. Work for him, was necessary only insofar as it put food on our plates and paid the bills. That was his only role; he was the hunter-gatherer. He never helped with the dishes or brushed the carpets, and God help you if you ever mentioned the ironing!

My younger brother Tom, was the most popular kid at school. All the boys wanted to be his best friend but none were; most of the girls wanted to be his girlfriend but none were. He was captain of the football team and was the highest goal scorer in the district. That won him the notable accolade of a mention by Mr Archer the school headmaster, at the morning assembly. Tom walked around like a Cheshire cat that whole day. He rarely achieved any recognition at school.

My mother didn't just tolerate life; she tolerated my father and her two boys. Like most mothers she attended to the drudgery of life and the quotidian tasks of village life. She cooked and cleaned but unlike other mothers she washed our clothes by hand every weekend; we were the only family in the village without a washing machine. She brushed the carpets every day with a brush that had long ago seen its finest hour because we were the only family without a vacuum cleaner. She enjoyed no luxuries and rarely received any appreciation for anything she ever did, least of all from my father.

All that mattered to my mother was that her boys were educated in the hope that someday they would escape the village and earn enough to free themselves from the life of abject misery that burdened her. Although my mother's implorations fell on Tom's deaf ears, they resonated with me. I was acutely aware from the dreadful literacy levels of my school peers, that to escape the affliction of unfulfilled lives it was imperative to have a university education from which to launch a career. Most of the kids in the village were the children of farm workers. Few had any ambition other than to follow in their parents' footsteps.

For me, school was the answer to the boredom that might otherwise have permeated my entire childhood. Every Christmas and Easter, the school breaks were a tiresome period through which I had to trudge like wading

through treacle. Those holidays were difficult but at least they lasted only two weeks or so. The Church and Sunday School services broke the monotony of my many, unoccupied, weekend hours.

The Summer holidays however, those months of emptiness, were almost beyond my tolerance. They might have broken my spirit that particular Summer, had it not been for three memorable events.

The first was *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. From early in my first year at Primary School, I brought books home that I devoured, nourishing my starving mind. The more I read the better I read, and the better I read the more I wanted to read. As the second year progressed I began digesting adventure stories and encyclopaedias. I read an entire book each night; when I had read them all, I read them all again.

By the time I was eight, I had read every book in the school library including the complete works of Shakespeare, not one word of which I understood. The problem then however was, what could I do, now that the library had yielded it's full harvest?

The second event was finding my saviour, Mr Hendry. He owned the village grocery store and ran the local Gospel Hall. I had been accustomed to attending Church every Sunday at lunchtime, not because I had a calling from God, but because it helped fill an hour or so of an

otherwise uneventful Sunday morning. Mr Hendry's Gospel meetings similarly helped stave off boredom in the mid afternoon. Even if I was learning about people and events that barely seemed credible to me, attending these institutions brought some colour to my otherwise monochrome weekends.

When Mr Hendry learned my family had no television or radio, he gave me my first Bible, an old worn-out book with thin, creased pages and a disintegrating leather cover. Despite its many, obvious aesthetic short-comings, I treasured that book. To me it was a priceless gem because it bore an inscription to me from Mr Hendry. It was a stalwart ally in my continuing battle against drudgery and tedium. Over the next year, I read it from cover to cover, three times.

Mr Hendry's motive for giving me that Bible was not merely to compensate me for a lack of audio-visual entertainment to which all my friends would succumb in the long Winter months or at weekends when it was raining too hard to play outside. No, his reason was more subtle and ingenious than that.

The week after he gave me the Bible, Mr Hendry asked what part I had read. *The beginning* of course, I had replied not quite understanding the meaning of his question. Where else would anyone start reading any book? It hadn't occurred to me then that not all books were written purely to tell a story and entertain.

Although I had read reference books in the course of reading the school library, I had not learned of their purpose. For me, encyclopaedias and the like had the odd nugget of gold in the form of stories about ancient Greek and Roman heroes. I lived for those paragraphs, carefully inserting little scraps of chocolate bar wrappings to mark them, visiting and reading them over and over again.

“Aye, that’s the right place to start,” he said. “And how far did you reach?”

I explained that I had read the first seven books – *one for each day of the week* I added. *I hadn’t quite understood it all because bits of it were beyond my understanding.* I didn’t tell him that parts were boring. I daren’t hurt his feelings; his motives were entirely altruistic, I couldn’t help but be aware of that. Anyone who spent more than a few minutes knew that he was the real McCoy.

“So, you think it’s a bit complicated do you?”

I nodded, not quite comprehending his meaning.

“Well, I think we can do something about that.”

The following week he presented me with a small, light-blue covered notebook. Inside, every one of the thirty pages it contained, were questions and quizzes, written in his beautiful, script-like handwriting. I saw so clearly that every letter and character had been caringly and

lovingly crafted from his own pure, selfless heart, designed to make me read the Bible more earnestly in order to find the answers to the questions he had conceived and in so doing have a better understanding of the God he loved and cherished.

Sadly, although it broke his heart, I could not in our lifetime bring myself to lie to him or his God, by accepting Jesus as my Lord and Saviour. Telling him the truth was more important than making him happy.

Thereafter, every week at the end of the Gospel meeting, Mr Hendry gave me a new notebook and took the completed one he had given me the previous week. We would spend an hour or so after the other children had left, to go over my answers and make any corrections that were necessary. I didn't realise it then of course, but in those moments I think I came as close to a Saint as anyone ever had.

The third event that prevented me losing my mind from utter ennui that Summer was the discovery of the Quarry. It was not so much a discovery, as a re-discovery. We had known about the Quarry for as long as we had lived in the village, but until that Summer we had not really tapped its full potential.

The Quarry was on McQuillan ground and was about a mile beyond the village. The McQuillans owned the largest arable farm in the area. When all three of the

McQuillan sons had outgrown the usefulness of school, they did what village tradition demanded of them – they joined the family business. Truth be told, we were all a bit scared of the McQuillan boys. I myself had never seen any of them but it was said they had bred a massive black dog on the farm. Apparently, a young boy had once tried to pet it and the dog had savaged him horribly, tearing him limb from limb. The boy's screams could be heard all the way back in the village I had been told. The image of that dog had often haunted my nightmares.

Tom had often chided me about this. "Why are ye scared o' somethin' ye havny even seen, ye daft thing!" he would say. I would respond by protesting my courage, my denial of any fear whatsoever. Although Tom was not shy about teasing me and even occasionally falsely blaming me for wrong-doing to save himself from my father's hand, he never to my knowledge, mentioned me screaming in my nightmares to anyone.

At some point, the quarrying of slate had caused the side of the hill where the plant was situated, to collapse. No lives were lost and to my knowledge, no-one was injured, but it was clear that the ground had no more to give. This collapse had left a sheer cliff face near the bottom of a gentle undulation in the land. The ground around the quarry buildings, about an acre or so, was now covered in rubble and broken slate. No grass or

plants grew around, except for one single sycamore tree.

Although young in tree terms, the sycamore's seed had somehow defied the circumstances in which it's small, helicopter, rotary blade had found itself. Left alone and sheltered from the elements by the surrounding stones, it had gripped and held vigorously onto the tiny area of rich soil into which it had happened to fall. Slowly and resolutely, it had germinated and pushed it's way upwards towards the welcoming light and sky. Sheltered by the cliff-face it had established itself and grown to a height greater than the cliff itself. One of its main branches was now just below the level of the top of the cliff, running parallel to it before branching off at a right angle.

Now in Summer, its numerous, glorious, emerald leaves could almost be grasped by anyone standing at the cliff's edge, the main branch itself being only a matter of two yards or so from the cliff and perhaps half a yard below. The proximity of the branch to the cliff had led Tom and his friends to invent a new game of daring and courage. They had climbed the tree from ground level, gained the branch in question and tied a long rope to it. They used this as a make-shift swing and had spent many hours, happily swinging back and forth.

Tom was my younger by about three minutes. We were twins. I was born first and I would regularly remind him of this especially when we fought over the distribution of

sweeties. I was the first-born and therefore I should have the lion's share.

Being a leader however, in contrast to me, came naturally to Tom. Although we were twins and shared the same bed and birthday, and we both had black hair and brown eyes, that's where the similarities ended. I was small for my age; he was tall - a full six inches taller. He was strong; I was a weakling. Whereas I was an ugly duckling he was a veritable swan.

But where he was lacking, I excelled. Unlike me, Tom never won any prizes at Day School, Sunday School or Gospel Hall or, at least not any that were awarded for excellence in academic subjects. He did have two prize books from his first two years attendance at Sunday School - but then, every school child had those.

If Tom's teasing occasionally crossed a line, I would retaliate by asking him a sum or a question about measuring temperature, or a science or history question. That stopped his teasing quickly enough. His face would puff up and turn red (once it turned purple), he would clench and unclench his fists and after a few moments of angry silence he would let out a long, slow breath, quietly turn around and walk away, sometimes muttering profanities under his breath.

In all the years we shared a room and a bed, in all our Summers, Autumns, Winters and Springs together and in

all the times I exasperated him, he never laid an angry hand on me. That was to his credit, because I could be cruel with my words. I knew from an early age that the spoken word coupled to a quick wit was more powerful than the keenest and sturdiest fist. A cutting remark could reduce any thug to a whimpering mass of nothingness more effectively than any beating.

I was dreading the Summer that year. Even before school ended I was wondering how I would pass the days without lessons and homework to occupy my mind. Mr Hendry's quizzes kept me going from week to week but soon even those would end for the Summer.

Tom took me to see the swing early in the Summer. "C'mon," he said excitedly. "It's brilliant. Jist wait and see how far ah cin swing oan it!" So off we set. I put my book - *The Epic of Gilgamesh* - aside and followed him out of the house. "Dinnae you tell the ithers ah've took ye there mind," he lectured me as we walked. "They dinnae want folks tae know about it!"

I held my silence, not knowing what all the fuss was about. It was only a swing, after all; it was hardly the key to Fort Knox or the cure for cancer.

When we arrived, Tod Loch from Sunside Street and six others were already there. Tod was indignant. "Whit's he dain'?" he demanded, thrusting his finger in my direction. "Ah thought we wis keepin' this a secret?"

“He’s ma brither,” Tom justified. “He’s aw right. He’ll no tell nobody.” He turned to look at me. I could see he was embarrassed to have been caught out, and by Tod Loch of all people! “Will ye?” he asked, looking straight at me.

I assured them all they could count on me. I could keep a secret as well as any of them and better than most, because most folks had little or no interest in anything I had to say. The group reluctantly accepted me and, one by one, they took turns to try the swing. I suggested that by climbing a short way up the cliff face with the rope in hand, the speed and arc of swinging could be increased. Tod was irritated by my suggestion, not because it was a bad one, but because he hadn’t made it. He insisted he be the first to try.

He grasped the rope in both hands and passed them up its length, taking up the slack as he climbed a few feet up the cliff face. “Push hard wi’ yer feet and legs when ye tak aff!” shouted one of the boys.

Just as I was about to advise against this, Tod hurled himself into the air and swung in an arc towards the ground. I saw his hand slip a little as he rose up. Slowly he came to a halt seeing the treetop in front of him before he began the accelerating descent backwards towards the ground. I could see him gripping the rope, more through fear than exhilaration, as he gained speed, rushing towards the ground. Momentarily he must have thought about releasing his grip as his speed of descent increased

but that hesitation cost him dear. His acceleration increased so much that he dared not do anything other than grip the rope even tighter.

We all saw the terror in his face, especially when he shut his eyes tight and hugged the rope like it was the Lord Jesus Himself on Judgment Day. Tom and the others laughed. I didn't. I knew what was about to happen.

Back he swung – to Tod it must have seemed an eternity but to us it was a fleeting moment. It was inevitable. Before the velocity of his body's descent was fully spent, he crashed into the cliff. Luckily his head was bent forward as he held onto the rope causing his back to hit the rock face, winding him. He collapsed onto the ground.

The others laughed as Tom ran over to him. I watched in horror thinking he was dead. Luckily, I was wrong. Just as Tom reached him, Tod began breathing.

"It's no funny!" he said weakly after a minute or so, rubbing his back. The others laughed even more. "It's no funny, di'ye hear me!" he snarled. After a few moments, he regained his composure and rose to his feet. Slowly, his breathing returned to normal. The others stopped laughing.

Looking in my direction, he made a few determined steps towards me. "You! You think it's funny dae ye! Havin' a gid laugh are ye?" I took a few steps backwards.

“Ah’ll show ye whit’s funny.”

I knew there was no point in protesting. He was determined to vent his anger on the weakest person there and by doing so, salvage what he could of his dignity. I waited, mouth dry, for the inevitable punch to my face.

“There’s no need fir any o’ that!” said Tom holding him back. “He wisnae laughin’. It wis them eegits.” Tod stopped but he was not done. He wanted revenge. He was after blood. My blood.

“Right! It’s like that then, is it?” he snarled at Tom

“Like what?”

“Cannae fight his ain battles, cannae no?”

“Naw! It’s no like that,” explained Tom. “He wisnae laughing. He’s no like that. He’s a’ books an’ that. He’s jist a daft wee thing; no wirth botherin’ about.”

“A’ the same, ah’ll no be having him or anybody laughin’ at me!” Tod looked around at the others, knowing his quest to pummel me into an early, rocky grave was at an end. The others lowered their eyes to the ground in trepidation. They had often felt the force of Tod Loch’s fist in their faces.

“Look,” said Tom. “There’s naebody laughin’ at naebody here. At least no noo. C’mon. Let’s swing.” And with that he took a running jump and grabbed the rope.

“Naw. Ah’m no fir swingin’,” said Tod, staring intently at me. “Ah’ve had enough o’ that fir noo. Let’s try somethin’ else.”

I could see that some despicable plan was hatching in his mind. If he couldn’t beat me to death, he would contrive some other way of harming me. All I wanted to do was run, run as fast as I could and read the end of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* safe in my home. I couldn’t die without knowing how the story ended.

However, Tod was not having any of that. “You feart?” he said looking all the while at me, advancing towards me, step by step. I didn’t answer. I couldn’t answer. My mouth was a dry, barren desert, bereft of any word. “Bloody right tae be feart! You and yer poofy books! Let’s see whit ye cin dae. You!” He spat the word at me. “You go up tae the tap there an’ jump ontae the branch. Dae that an’ ye cin be in oor gang. Right?”

I tried to conjure some excuse to decline his kind invitation to join his exclusive club, but my tongue was stuck fast to the roof of my mouth.

“Laeh’m alain!” said Tom, still holding the rope. “I telt ye afore; he’s no worth botherin’ about.”

“Naw,” said Tod slowly. “Ah’m havin’ him.”

I had never before been so afraid. I could feel my legs tremble and weaken; I thought I would pass out. One of

the boys, Frank, Tod's younger brother by a year, had managed to sneak behind me. I felt him pushing me forward, reversing my retreat.

"You, Tam! Leave well alone!" Tod threw the words over his shoulder, sensing Tom walking towards us. He returned his attention to me. "Now, you. What are you goin' tae do? Are ye goin' tae jump or am ah goin' tae huv tae batter ye!"

I searched desperately for some words, anything, an apology, some way of begging him to let me go, a plea to Tom to rescue me as he had done so often before ... But my mouth remained resolutely silent. I must have cut a sorry, if not stupid figure, mouth opening and closing but no words issuing.

Tod lifted his fist and shook it in my face. "Get!" he hissed. "Get up there an' dae it!"

"Right yous!" said Tom, walking up to Tod and pushing him aside. "That's enough o' that. Lae'im alain or ah'll be gain you a lesson!"

The others crowded round. They sensed a fight and they wanted front seats.

Knowing that if it came to fight, even Tom could not fend off so many of them, I felt compelled to say something. I put up my hands in a gesture of surrender to buy some time. My fear dissipated somewhat as my mouth

regained its wetness. My powers of speech slowly returned. I explained that I was no coward and could do anything any one of them could. I regretted it even as I said it.

“So?” remarked Tod. “So bloody what? That disnae get ye up there ‘though, dis it? Ye’er still a wee pee-in-the-pants feertie aren’t ye!”

As calmly as I could, I told them that I would be more than happy to emulate anything they did. If he, Tod, were to demonstrate how it could and should be done, I would gladly do the same. I was quietly proud of having out-maneuvered him, ‘though to be honest, winning a game of wits against Tod Loch was no great accomplishment.

To my dismay and returning fear, Tod snarled, “Ye’er feart! Dinae deny it. Anybody could dae that jump. It’s so easy I could dae it wi’ ma een clawsed. I didnae need tae dae it just so’s you cin copy me. So, get yer baby backside up there and dae it! Now! Ye’er wee brither’s no ganna save ye.”

I looked at Tom. He looked back at me. “Listen you Tod Loch,” Tom said. “Naebody’s gan tae dae anythin’. It’s stupit! Bloody stupit! An’ you’re the maist stupit fir suggestin’ it! No you, no him, naebody’s dain anthin’ cos we’er fed up o’ ye, an’ yer daft notions. Bad enough ye git the wind knocked oot o’ ye, but ye’ll no let go ‘til

somebody's hurt awfy bad. Or worse!"

"Right big Tam," said Tod turning his back on us, walking away. He knew he had us on the ropes. It was a matter of honour now. Our pride was at stake. Did I have what it took to make the jump? It was only a short distance after all. Any eight year old could do that. But the height of it – that made all the difference. On the other hand, it was all in the mind, I told myself. What did it matter if the jump was thirty feet up in the air? It was still only a couple of yards. All I had to do was put the fact that it was so high, out of my mind and the jump would be easy-peasy.

I was about to announce my intention to jump, when ... "Right, ah'll show ye a' how tae dae it," I heard Tom say. "Ah'll dae it ma'sel and that'll be that. Right?" Silence. "Ah'll go first and then you Lochie, got it? An' then, the rest o' ye."

The others looked at Tod, too frightened to say anything. Tom looked at Tod and then at me. He knew he could easily beat Tod in a one-on-one fight – everyone there knew that. Nevertheless, not even Tom could fight off seven lads if they chose to attack him simultaneously.

I wanted to protest, to stop Tom from jumping. It was foolhardy. It was madness! But, whatever my previous hyperbole, for every ounce of courage Tom had, I had ten of cowardice. I stood rooted to the spot as I watched my

brother walk up the slope of ground to the top of the cliff. Even then I had half a thought that he might just turn and run to the McQuillan farm and seek refuge there. But then I saw him take careful stock of the distance. The others too stood in awed admiration, all except Tod.

“He’ll no dae it,” Tod said. “He’s a pansy, like his brither.”

“Aye he wull,” said Frank. “Look, he’s goin’ ...”

Tom had taken a good few paces back from the cliff’s edge. He ran making a huge effort to leap well before he reached the edge. As he soared majestically through the air towards the tree, his legs frantically pushing the pedals of an invisible bicycle, his cheeks puffed, holding his breath, eyes bulging ... I thought I was dreaming. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

For those few seconds I heard nothing, saw nothing, knew nothing but my brother soaring through the air to the tree, to the branch ... Slowly, slowly, slowly and yet so quickly, legs pedalling, arms outstretched he pulled the branch almost with the strength of his will, through space towards him.

In fact, he had almost over-judged the distance. He slammed into the branch, almost doubling and summersaulting over it. Up went his heels, down went his head. For a moment I thought he would roll right over and tumble through the branches to the ground. I

held my breath.

Fortunately, Tom managed to hold on. He steadied himself and grinned breathlessly down at me. He shuffled along the branch to the rope and slid down. "Right Lochie, up ye go," he said casually, winking at me. Tod said nothing. He took a few steps towards the slope. He stopped. "Whit's wrang Lochie? Peein' yer pants?" Silently, Tod walked up and made his way gingerly to the edge. He took one look at the gap and stepped back immediately.

"Ah huv tae gae hame. It's past ma supper time," he shouted. And that was the last we saw of him that day.

On the way home, I asked Tom what it had been like to make the jump. Initially he feigned disinterest but I knew he was desperate to talk about it. "Och! It wisnae that hard. You jist huv tae mak sure ye have the run-up right. Ye dinae want to jump oan the edge, ye need tae jump afour it. Nae problem ..." Then, after a moment's thought, "... but dinnae you be tryin' it. Only dafties dae things like that. Dafties like me!"

I told him he wasn't a very good liar - *he was being economical with the truth.*

"Eco - whit? You read that in that book?" he asked. "You're goin' tae turn intae a book if ye'er no careful. Whit are ye reading anyhow?"

I told him about the Great Gilgamesh and his friend Endiku, how Gilgamesh had helped Endiku in his time of trouble and how together they battled the elements, the land and even the Gods.

“Is that who ye think ah am? Gilgamesh?” he asked. I told him, perhaps. “Aye, I think I like that name. Gilgamesh.”

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Tod stayed off school for the rest of the week due to a belly-bug apparently. When we eventually saw him again, he assiduously avoided the subject of the jump. This ruffled Tom’s feathers. I was all for leaving well alone. We had, after all, made our point, which had not been lost on the other boys. But Tom wasn’t going to let Lochie off that easily.

After school, Tom ambushed him by hiding behind the bike shed. “Well, Toddy ma lad,” said Tom. “Ye’ll no mind showin’ us how brave ye are the nicht then. Ye can mak the jump the night.”

“Sorry, Chief, no can dae. I’m no better fae my belly yet. Ma ma says I huv tae take things easy. Ah’ve no tae get excited or anythin’ like that. Besides I dinae like the swing anyway; it’s fur kids ... it’s no fur the likes o’ me.” He looked at Tom and, seeing his excuses garnered no sympathy, turned his face to me.

No longer was there any disdain in his eyes; there was instead, something I had not before associated with the loutish Tod Loch. Vulnerability. His look was a silent plea for understanding and for possibly ... possibly, I thought, for forgiveness.

Tod Loch and I were never destined to be friends in this life but I simply could not ignore this. I put my hand on Tom's arm and told him the jump was a daft idea, he had been right about that and it was just as daft to pursue the matter. Somewhat surprised and, I thought, a little disappointed, Tom said no more. We never saw Tod or any of the others at the swing after that. We had it all to ourselves for that entire Summer.

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The next day at Gospel Hall, I duly gave my completed notebook to Mr Hendry and he, in exchange, gave me a new one. "Now, young lad, what have you been up to this week? Learn anything new?"

I told him about *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and some other books I had read. I didn't mention the swing.

"Good. What about the Bible? I hope you're still reading that."

I assured him I was. I had to in order to complete the quizzes he gave me.

"And what bit of the Bible have you been reading?"

I told him about the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

“Ah then you’ll know all about the twin.”

I was utterly flabbergasted. What twin? Yes, there were twins in the Old Testament – Esau and Jacob – but there were no twins in the New Testament. Had I misread it or had I missed something?

Mr Hendry saw the confusion in my face and chuckled. “Aye, I thought as much,” he said. “You know the bit where Thomas puts his ...” I finished the story for him, just to prove I had read it.

“Very good,” he said, looking pleased. “And do you know what he was called because of that?” I shook my head. “Doubting Thomas.” Oh yes, I exclaimed. I remembered that bit - after Jesus had shown him His wounds, He chastised him for needing to see before believing. But what, I wondered, was all the stuff about the twin? “Well, Thomas’ real name was Didymus,” he explained. I almost giggled but managed to remain composed. In my circles the term, “Diddy” had derisory connotations such as might be applied to someone like Tod Loch.

What did that mean, I asked. “Didymus means ‘twin’,” Mr Hendry said softly. Now, I knew what ‘Didymus’ meant, but I was none the wiser. We left it at that.

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Every night that week I couldn't rid my mind of the jump. I even dreamed about it. Tom had managed it. Why then couldn't I? Perhaps it was because Tom had always been my better at everything requiring physical strength. He could lift heavier weights than I and he could run much faster. But there was surely more to the jump than strength and speed? If he could make the jump, why couldn't I?

One night when these thoughts were particularly worrying, preventing me from sleeping, I climbed out of bed.

"What are ye doin'?" asked Tom, sleepily.

Nothing I assured him. *I was thirsty and was going to fetch a drink.*

"Well dinnae be long. Ah've tae get ma beauty sleep. It no easy being this handsome." He was fast asleep before I even closed the bedroom door.

Being Summer, it was still light outside, even 'though it was late. The house was quiet. I could hear my father snoring. Good. That meant my mother was fast asleep as well. My father never really fell into a deep sleep until my mother was beside him.

I put my overcoat and shoes on and carefully opened the back door.

I can't remember any part of the journey, there or back. I

just remember standing in my pyjamas at the top of the cliff looking down at the branch, my overcoat neatly folded on the grass.

There was enough light to see clearly. The sun had dropped in the sky but was still above the horizon behind me. I was strangely calm, despite knowing full well what I intended to do. It was like being in a dream you've already dreamt, where you can't stop something awful about to happen. The only difference was, I didn't know how this dream would end.

I took a dozen or so steps back, braced myself, took a few deep breaths, exhaled slowly and ran for all my might. I imagined the McQuillan dog chasing me. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest ... I felt every thud of my feet as they dug into the firm earth under me ... I felt the wind in my face. As I reached the edge of the cliff I gave an almighty heave and launched myself into the air. For a few seconds of eternity I felt nothing. There was no air, no sky, no ground. All I was aware of was the blood rushing in my ears drowning the silence of the dying day.

Then, I felt a sickening thud in my chest and felt leaves in my face. I reached frantically in front of me and wrapped my arms around the smooth bark of the branch. I held on for dear life.

My legs and feet dangled in the air. I tried to lift one up,

to hook it around the branch but I was too weak. I tried to slow my breathing. Gradually it did. The volume of blood rushing past and through my ears lessened and my heart rate subsided. Slowly, the world came into focus. Only then did I become fully aware of what I had done.

Climbing trees was something I could do as well as Tom. First, I circled the branch with my arms; that made me more secure. Next, I shuffled along the branch to the rope and then easily slid down.

I sat on the ground, my head swimming. I was scared. I was elated. I was alive. I had done it!

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“I asked ye tae no make a noise!” Tom complained sleepily when I climbed into bed beside him.

In hushed tones I told him what I had done. I couldn’t stop myself. I had done it! I had faced my fear and, just like Gilgamesh, I had conquered it.

“Ye’ve done whit?” Tom exclaimed, turning to look at me through half-closed eyes.

I told him again.

“Awa’ and bile yer heed. Them books huv got ye a’ cufuffled. Ye cannae tell stories fae real life.”

But, I protested, I really had made the jump. Just like he had. I really had.

“Ah’m no swallowin’ that unless ah see fir mase!’. Now sleep!

I whispered *goodnight* to him.

“Awe right wee man,” Tom murmured. “I thought you wis Endiku and ah wis Gilgamesh.”

Almost immediately, I heard him give a long sigh and settle into a deeper, more regular breathing pattern.

I turned away from him and snuggled my head into the edge of the pillow. *No, you’re not Gilgamesh, I thought. You’re my twin brother, Thomas. In the morning, I’ll show you the chlorophyll marks from the sycamore leaves on my pyjamas, the freshly, broken branches on the sycamore tree and the place where I mistakenly left my overcoat tonight.*

This thought had barely entered my head when I gave my body to sleep and dreams devoid of demon dogs.

My New Best Friend

Trudy Duffy-Wigman

‘Say something tae me. Please.’

The man sits, half-turned, facing the other passengers.

‘Please?’

His voice is plaintive, non-threatening; at odds with his torn clothing and abundant tattoos. Most people in the bus have an urgent text to send; those who don’t have a mobile stare out in the dark night with determination. Two women move to the lower deck.

‘Why doesnae anybody say anything nice tae me?’

I am close to the man. The text I am tapping tells of my day, of the film I saw with a friend; matters of life and death. I glance; the man locks eyes with me and doesn’t let go.

‘Say something nice tae me, please.’

‘How was your day then?’ My voice sounds funny. I feel a collective sigh of relief emanating from the other passengers. They’re off the hook.

‘Crap, man, total crap.’ He waves a half-empty bottle of cider. ‘My best pal died.’ A tear trickles a path on his cheek. ‘I went tae the funeral today. His parents chucked me oot; didnae want me tae be there. Blame me for what happened.’ He cries; heaving sobs with the odd racking cough in between. ‘You were trying to be a good friend; going to the funeral and all.’ How do you say a kind word to someone waving a bottle, looking like a thug and crying his eyes out?

‘I jus’ wanted tae say something nice to him, like.’ ‘I’m sure he knows,’ I say. ‘I’m sorry you lost your best friend.’ ‘You’re a friend. You’re nice tae me. Not like the others.’

He indicates the rest of the passengers.

I press the buzzer; get out and cross the road before the bus.

He waves.

My New Best Friend. I wonder what my parents would think of him.

The Authors

Hamish McGee is the *nôm de plume* of Ramesh Gupta. He was born in India from where he inherited his country's love of epic poetry and story telling. He has lived in Great Britain, mostly Scotland, for most of his life.

His background is in the health care services. He qualified as a doctor from a Scottish Medical School and trained and practised as a surgeon with the National Health Service, gaining a position as a consultant general surgeon specialising in laparoscopic, emergency and cancer surgery.

His interests in writing include epic poetry and short stories although he is currently engaged in the writing of a novella and a novel. He has written three epic poems; a Celtic ballad (over 300 pages long), a fantasy adventure (over 400 quatrain stanzas long) and a supernatural thriller.

Trudy Duffly-Wigman was born in the Netherlands when the Second World War was still a vivid memory and the telephone – if you had one – was big, black and bakelite. She remembers her enjoyment when the first television programmes for children were shown (Saturday afternoon, 2 to 3 pm) and the night she was allowed to stay up to see the first Man on de Moon.

She has been writing for about fifteen years now; always short fiction or even shorter fiction. She is part of a local writers' group and has seen three pieces published in anthologies; she look forward to a time when she has to find other excuses than running her own business to prevaricate.

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