

DIGNITY

a chronicle of labour

by Tim Gooding

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Part One

BIRTHDAYS

1925

I

I clung to her walls like a cat on a carpet. I knew what was coming.

Charlie Shipwater had long concluded that were he to die in the pit it would be while bottom-holing, but in the end, mauled by a runaway skip in E tunnel, it was the slope which did for him. The notices yellowed in a cigarette tin. Residence within an inner pocket of Charlie's suitcoat, pocket buttoned, coat tightly folded, stuffed in a wooden box stencilled 'DANGER – EXPLOSIVES', thrust deep under Malcolm and Sarah's bed, saw the incursion of salt spray slowed but not halted. The flat red tin, Black Cat, ex management, was blistering. The suit smelt of dead air. It had been warm, redolent of back yard and sunday morning, Malcolm remembered, on packing away after a day's hang in the sun. Gesticulating on the line, it had alarmed the dog, Rowdy fearing the wrath of the previous owner had not departed with him. Following Charlie's passing, Malcolm had worn the suit until it pinched at the waist. The family waist was evolving. The trousers had always been a little short. Yet there was wear left. Sarah could darn darns. A boy could grow into it.

Hurrying home from the pit, Malcolm straightaway had been chased back into the street. The house was too small, the walls too thin, for a man to stay. The miners' homes, company-owned, appeared designed on the principle of the hutch: breeding was anticipated and desirable for provision of a future

workforce, but assumed to be a silent activity, or at least that fellow inhabitants of the four rooms would not care if it was not. Malcolm did as he was told. He had no wish to be there at the actual moment. The only thing he knew about the delivery of children, one thing more than he wanted, was that even during drought it involved water. For some reason. His shoulders ached from the bucket yoke. He walked slowly to the pub, downed two or three slow, responsible pints, garnered a flask of Red Mill on tick, walked more slowly home, resisted the Red Mill, knocked just in case, and was greeted by Sarah, still big.

He had not read the clippings to Dot. He turned up the lantern wick. "Killed by a runaway skip". His father would have heard it coming. Malcolm shoved the thought away. His lips moved as he read the sentence he liked most.

"The funeral was well-attended by members of The Grand United Order Of Free Gardeners, and there were many floral tributes."

Malcolm lacked his father's touch in the garden. He read the tribute amid deepening appreciation of the anxiety surrounding the bringing of life into the world. At times he had managed to coax a vegetable from the soil but these small few were undersized misshapen monsters, less tasty and far uglier than the vegetables of his childhood. The type of vegetable that scared children at night. Flowers raised even stronger resistance to his attentions. His blossoms – rare, in the manner of accidents or freaks of nature – or strays from another garden - rapidly blackened with coal dust, choked and died, where the same

varieties of bloom had sprung up multitudinous, joyful and long-living, on his father's watch. Under Charlie Shipwater's hand the garden had been a blaze of colour in the blackened town. One of several such blazes. It was plain there was a secret here, shared by members of The Grand United Order Of Free Gardeners. What befuddled non-member Malcolm was how a man learned the secret in the first place. Were you born with the knack? Was the knowledge passed on, down the generations, digging together in the garden? As pit knowledge passed from father to son, picking at the coalface? For voluble exegesis, post-shift, at the pub? Digging, drinking, his father had not passed on a shred of garden knowledge. There were no other opportunities. Charlie's legacy was the rubbery crescent smile at this moment creeping cheekwards in recognition that fathers needed one thing they did better than their sons. Malcolm wondered what a son of his might be good at, and what one skill he, Malcolm, might keep in reserve to best him. Fishing was a possibility. A probability. Agreed, a boy must be taught how to fish. But where did it say a father must pass on every single one of his angling secrets?

A flattened violet fell from the fold of a clipping listing local court appearances on the afternoon of the burial. The pit had closed for half a shift and Charlie's mates had made next morning's newspaper. Attested by nature of crime and size of fine imposed, Richard Jones could hold the most alcohol whilst Hugh Meiklejohn possessed the loudest and foulest mouth. Malcolm liked to picture The Free Gardeners blind drunk and rioting *in memoriam*.

Malcolm was himself a memorial, reluctant, to mining tragedy. Submerged in a fontful of freezing northern Calvinism, he had been christened Samuel Malcolm Shipwater in memory of ten year old Samuel Horne who had drowned along with twenty five other child workers in the Huskar colliery disaster of 1838. Samuel Horne was a childhood playmate of Malcolm's grandmother Emma, who had insisted upon pit-drowned Samuel's continued commemoration via her pit-bound grandson. Malcolm's certificated appellation was known only to a dwindling few as he had seized the opportunity to dispense with the unwanted tag when enrolling himself on his first day of school.

Sarah shouted his name through the wall, the second syllable mutating into a howl of pain succeeded by witch-like laughter and subsequent admonition, the divided opinions of three women concerning pain, breathing, calmness and the role and level of water, panicked heels on loose timber, a teacup smashing, violent stoking of the fire. Gramma Shipwater shouted his name. Malcolm shouted acknowledgement, several times, in a rhythm, resolved to filch a new Black Cat tin upon his next audience with management, and methodically restored clippings to tin, tin to suit, suit to box, box to bed. Nan Baker and Gramma screeched his name in unison. A purse-lipped moan – Sarah – followed, at length, rising through octaves. Then his name again, from all the voices, like a howling.

“Malcolm! Go! Go!”

“Where?”

"The pub! Go to the pub!"

"Shut."

"Go across the road. Go somewhere."

"Go, Malcolm."

"Go!"

Across the road, a paste-like substance spattered Dot's face, squelched through her knuckles. She thrust an excited arm at her father, fist clenched, before suddenly opening her fingers. Flecks of dinner slop hit Malcolm in the face. The rubbery crescent smile stayed in place. He took another walk with intent to polish off the Red Mill.

The sun dipped behind the western ridge leaving The Bay in cold shadow. The sky took on a deep blue glow, darkening to black in the east. He had seen the colour before, on the blade of a new shovel. Luminous pink streaks held on in the west. It grew darker and colder as he walked down the bush track linking a scattering of cottages to the main road. Emerging from thick scrub into open ground, the cottages fell into two neat rows flanking the road which sliced south through The Bay. Uniformity of house construction exaggerated a perspective which found its vanishing point at the pub atop the southernmost hill.

Based in England, the company found its time consumed in wrestling concerns more pressing than the maintenance of antipodean properties. Weatherboard curled and twisted, loosening nails and creaking in the wind. Tongues of rust accompanied drips, surrounded nail-holes, crept along guttering. Houses

quickly turned grey to match the iron of the tanks. They sank easily into the evening as Malcolm approached, and the kero lamps came on. The Miners Advocate had designated the housing "a disgrace". Malcolm was not sure what it meant, what it said about him, his family, to inhabit a disgrace. He faintly resented the suggestion being broadcast. Perhaps The Bay was a disgrace but it was assuredly not a slum, for if The Bay was a slum, what then was Barnsley, Yorkshire? So ran his mother's argument. Unfamiliar with Barnsley, who was he to disagree? A true slum did not exhibit empty space between dwellings, Gramma said.

He turned left at the level crossing and walked along the railway running from pit to loading jetty, stepping sleeper to sleeper, familiar with the distance between. The faint sheen of rails curving away towards the beach guided him through the darkness as he hurried from the narrow cutting under the white bridge. The white bridge led to the cemetery, where his father lay. A vision of bones came to him. He shook his head and walked faster. The engines were stored for the night but he could not dismiss the thought that something might silently appear behind him, from the direction of E tunnel.

Surf thumped in the dark ahead. He felt it in his feet. Emerging onto the flat of the weighbridge, the full stench of easterly-borne brine and weed hit his face, blowing away the inclination to look behind. The horizon had vanished but he could make out the faint white of the breakers. From the weighbridge, the rails ran southward the length of the beach on a ledge chiselled into the hillside, safely above the sand, before curving eastward at the headland to follow the

jetty out to sea. Malcolm sat on the seaward edge of a sleeper, legs dangling, and rolled a cigarette inside his coat. He wished he had possessed the foresight to have wangled two flasks of Red Mill.

Miners wanted sons. The tradition wove as a black ribbon back to the old, dark, cold country. Did it necessarily adhere in the new? He remembered his first day down. A serious youth, for some reason. Graduating with the rubbery crescent smile. The Bay considered Malcolm's an open face, painted on a closed door. He remembered his relief when Dot was born. As if to emphasise the point, her hair was a light, mousey brown.

The mist caused his cigarette to sputter. Tingled on his face. Haloed lamps on the jetty. The lamps were installed following an attempt to gelignite the piers during the wartime strike. Scab labour was arriving by steamship from Sydney. Striking men lined the cliff top to pelt the scabs with rocks. The women of The Bay kettled them with metal pots and wooden spoons. Baton-wielding police pursued the strikers through the town. Malcolm had taken refuge under the house, in the company of youthful border collie Rowdy, who deemed proceedings a great game until he and master were joined by an unnamed Germanic police dog. Malcolm's mother screamed at the snarling thrash underfoot. Nothing was proven. The police broke three of Malcolm's ribs expressing disappointment that the gelignite box contained only an old suit and newspaper clippings dating from 1911.

Sarah hated fuss. Her mother Eleanor vibrated with it. Fuss, with a north Somerset accent, was the embroidery of Nan Baker's life, adding colour and line to diminished circumstances. Fuss cost nothing, could be manufactured out of nothing, was applicable to everything and available to everybody, no matter how humble. In Nan Baker's quivering hummingbird hands, fuss was both everyday and ceremonial, equally irradiating births, deaths, cups of tea and what to wear. To fuss was to love. Such love had all but ruined Sarah's wedding. Determined to keep it out of her marriage, hearing herself utter an expression like "Into every life a little rain must fall", tinged with north Somerset, or upon seeing herself rearrange Malcolm's shaving things, or wipe a speck of food from the corner of his mouth with the corner of her apron, in horror, Sarah saw her body inhabited by the spirit of her mother. She shuddered the presence out and away, and stiffened her defences. Malcolm made a joke of it, said he didn't care. She did not believe him.

Aware that fuss may rush in to fill a marital vacuum, Sarah forgave her mother. Forgiveness turned to screaming after an hour in the same room. To which her mother's reaction was incomprehension followed by affront followed by guilt, all of which, after extreme show of penitence by her daughter, subsequently proceeded into storage. Of many reasons for wanting the birth over and done with, her mother's spreading presence in a shrinking house was the most potent. It was also the factor most likely to delay proceedings because the hovering presence caused Sarah's insides to clench. When the child appeared to stir early in the evening of the thirty first, Sarah

felt that she and her impending offspring were in accord. The sooner the fuss died down and returned to Swansea, the better.

She stabbed the fire. A log fell with a crash and rolled across the hearth. She winced, stilled herself, and stared deep into the corning beef. Hearing only the wind, she risked a glance over her shoulder before lowering into a squat, like a weightlifter, to address the log. Her knees clicked. She closed her eyes. A door creaked. Straightening as promptly as her condition allowed, she reprised the stare into corning beef. Behind, she knew, her mother was standing in the bedroom doorway, smiling. She jabbed at the beef, arhythmically. Nan Baker positioned herself within peripheral vision.

"What can I do to help?"

Sarah pretended not to stiffen.

"Would you like me to make the white sauce?"

Sarah stepped back from the fire, hand on stomach, and let out a howl of pain.

"I think it's started."

"I knew. I had a feeling. Keep calm. Keep calm."

Gazing at the bedroom ceiling, realising it had not started after all, or if it had started it had stopped, Sarah concluded that in foolishly following her mother's advice to remain calm she had given her child the completely wrong impression. A decent dose of fraughtness might have convinced the indecisive child that its time had indeed arrived.

"The child knows when you're anxious."

She envied Eve, asleep in the next room, availing herself of bed without Gramma Shipwater for company. Full name Evelyn, Eve had shortened herself upon reading The Book Of Genesis. Five years older than brother Malcolm, Eve was deemed to be simple, but could read, slowly, and draw. Her waking hours were spent with the Bible and in the charcoal sketching of flowers harvested on a daily stride up and down the dry creek bed which snaked behind the house. White lilies were her preferred subject. Sarah was aware that something had happened with Eve and a soldier when Eve was younger. Only Gramma Shipwater and Eve knew what. It was possible Eve did not know, exactly.

The troop to the bedroom attended by flapping entourage recurred several times between late afternoon and midnight as the child started, stopped, sprinted, dawdled, advanced, retreated, lurched, balked, jammed, twisted, turned, lashed out wildly, punching and kicking in tantrum, before folding arms, digging in heels and seeming to decline the jump altogether. Dot had not been like this. Dot had been painful but straightforward, co-operative in a difficult time for both parties, an approach that sat well with Sarah.

Exhaustion, pain, hallucination - a school boyfriend, missing in action, returned - did not impair Sarah's recognition of fussiness when she saw it. It seemed that, despite her best endeavours, the trait had not been expunged from the line but rather had outflanked her by skipping a generation. She upbraided herself. She was a *carrier*. Her unborn child was a *fusser*. While the *donor* sat by her side, head drooping, lower teeth slipping, birdlike grip on her

daughter's hand, having nodded off, enervated by several hours of obsessive stroking. Attending opposite, punctilious but mistrustful of stroking, face down on the bed, Gramma Shipwater appeared to have fallen on her knitting needle in aggravated impatience or ritual surrender, the illusion punctured by gravelly snoring as the Barnsley widow inhaled coal dust from the blanket. The walls of the tiny bedroom appeared to be closing in, jamming slumbering midwives tight against the bed like chairs in a closed saloon.

She glared at the mound under the sheet, impatient for its next peevish move. The worst thing about giving birth was the incessant attention. She resolved that if the birth was not to be a cooperative effort, then it would be a test of wills.

The scream woke Malcolm. Matches fumbled and lost down the thunderpit, door flung open to admit starlight, he was slumped sideways against the wall, boots stinking after stamping on a burning paper bag containing human faeces, Rowdy keenly sniffing, when proceedings re-commenced, if that was what was happening, for the umpteenth time. He kicked at the dog. Get out of it. Eleven hours later, nine minutes before midday, April 1, it was over.

Every birthday. We had to haul you out by the ankles, like a calf. April Fool. A breach birth calf. April Fool. The rope broke. April Fool. In the end we used a length of pit hawser. April Fool. Powered by the skip haulage machine. April Fool. We washed you in with the dishes because of the drought. You smelled like corned beef until the drought broke. You were so slippery with soap and beef fat that you squirted out of mum's arms, landed on your head, squashed your spine, and grew up as broad as you were tall. Or as thick as you were short.

Or like a keg on legs. Or a forty four gallon drum. Or the barrel of a cement mixer. Or a moon-tanned, red-haired Samoan. April Fool. Every birthday. You'd think they'd get sick of it. Dad found a paper bag going up in flames on the doorstep.

"Never stamp out a burning paper bag on April Fool's Day, Ron."

You never know what's inside. Well, you do, but you forget and then it's too late. Every birthday for fifty nine years. We've bought you a bike. You don't have to go to school today. Nerys Ferris is having your baby. April Fool, Ron.

"It's a girl."

Mum's joke. When they let Dad in.

"We called you Ron because you didn't come till later, Ron."

Dad's joke. It's a fair bet he said "See you 'ron" before he jumped. Or fell. Or was pushed. He was sacked for turning up late. Pissed his pants until the pit boss blurted out 'April Fool'.

There was not yet a red hair on the fleshy head – which was more cube than globe - but the translucent eyelids, pink with a pale lash fringing, over eyes the grey of overcast sky, elsewhere the skin pure milk, foretold a life to be eked away from sunlight. It was clear to Malcolm that baby Ron, like himself, was born to mine. In the year of Ron's birth, there were four hundred and three men and fifty horses working in the pit, in three shifts. At the coalface, men worked in pairs. Father with son, brother with brother. A runaway skip had broken the Shipwater line. As of now, Malcolm hewed in the knowledge that in fourteen years the family line would be restored.

Red hair is a sign of intelligence. Red hair is a sign of sporting ability. Red hair is a sign your mother was frightened by a bunch of carrots. Red hair is a sign your mother was frightened by smoking in bed. Red hair is a sign your mother was frightened by your father. And his mother was frightened by his father. And his mother was frightened by his father, and so on, all the way back to the first milk-skinned redhead on the Lothian coal to frighten his wife and so bugger the rest of us backwards, forever. April Fool. There's been some kind of mix-up and you're really Ron Bradman. April Fool. They found your father's body. April Fool. No more. I'm taking a few of the bastards with me. Only some of what they said actually happened. I wasn't born on April the first anyway. April Fool.