

SHUGGIE BAIN

DOUGLAS
STUART

PICADOR

1992
THE SOUTH SIDE
1

1981
SIGHTHILL
15

1982
PITHEAD
97

1989
THE EAST END
371

1992
THE SOUTH SIDE
413

Eight

By the time the back doors on the Albion van were open, there were people standing in the middle of the road openly staring. They held wet tea towels and bits of half-finished ironing, things they hadn't bothered to put down in order to come and look. Families came out from the low houses and settled down on their front steps as if there was something good on telly. A tribe of sooty weans, led by a trouserless boy, crossed the dusty street and stood in a semicircle around Agnes. She politely said hello to the children, who stared back at her, rings of a red saucy dinner still around their mouths.

The tight formation of the miners' houses meant the front doors faced one another, each building separated by a low fence and a thin strip of grass. The front doors opposite Agnes's were all thrown open, and women stood watching, a half dozen children milling about each one, all with the same face. It was like the photo of her Granny Campbell and her Irish dozen that Willie had once shown her. Agnes, standing on her stoop, smiled across the low fence and waved, her beaded rabbit eaves glinting in the light.

"Hello." She politely addressed the general congregation.

"Ye movin' in?" said a woman from the door beyond her own. The woman's blond hair curled back on dark brown roots. It made her look like she had on a child's wig.

"Yes."

"All of yeeese?" asked the woman.

"Yes. My family and I," corrected Agnes. She introduced herself and held out her hand.

The woman scratched at her root line. Agnes wondered whether the woman spoke only in questions, when she finally answered. "Ah'm Bridie Donnelly. Ah've lived upstairs for twenty-nine years. Ah've had fifteen downstairs neighbours in aw that time."

Agnes felt all the Donnelly eyes on her. A skinny girl with dark round eyes brought a tray of mismatched tea mugs through the door. Everyone took one. They didn't draw their eyes from Agnes as they supped.

Bridie nodded over the fence. "That there is Noreen Donnelly, ma cousin. But no ma blood, ye understand." A grey-coloured woman rolled her tongue in her head and nodded sharply. Bridie Donnelly went on: "That lassie is Jimmy McClinchy. Ma cousin. She is ma blood." A child-size woman next door to Noreen took a long drag on a short dout. Her eyes narrowed from the smoke, and right enough she looked like Bridie in a headscarf. They all looked like Bridie, even the boys, only they looked less masculine.

From out of the side of her eye, Agnes could feel another woman crossing the dusty street. The woman stopped and talked to the semicircle of raggedy children; she nodded like they had given her grave news and marched on through the front gate to the new house. Agnes had no escape. Behind her Leek came sullenly out of the house for his next load.

"Is that your man?" said the newly arrived woman without introduction. The meat of her face was a taut as a leathered skull. Her eyes were deep pockets in her head, and her hair was a rich wild brown but thinning, like the coat of an uncombed cat. She stood in bagged-out stretch pants, the stirrups stuffed into men's house slippers.

Agnes stumbled over the absurdity of the question. There were twenty-odd years between her and Leek. "No. That's my middle wean. Sixteen in the spring."

"Oh! In the spring is it." The woman considered this for a minute and then jabbed a sharp finger out at the vegetable van. "Is that there your man?"

Agnes looked at a mover struggling with the old television she had tried to wrap for discretion in a bed sheet. "No, he's a friend of a friend who's lending a hand."

The woman thought on this. She sucked her gaunt cheeks into her skull head. Agnes made a half wave and a half turn to leave. "What's that on your sleeves?" asked the thin woman.

Agnes looked down and cradled her fluffy arms protectively, like they were kittens. The rhinestones shook nervously. "They're just wee beads."

Shona Donnelly, the tea girl, exhaled slowly. "Oh! Missus, I think they're lovely—"

The thin woman interrupted her. "Do ye even have a man?"

The front door opened again, and Shuggie came out on to the top step. Without addressing the woman he turned to his mother and put his hands on his hips; he thrust a foot forward and said as clear as Agnes had ever heard him speak, "We need to talk. I really do not think I can live here. It smells like cabages and batteries. It's simply impossible."

The heads of the audience turned one to another in shock. It was like a dozen faces looking at their own likenesses in the mirror. "Wid ye get a load o' that. Liberrace is moving in!" screamed one of the women.

The women and children howled as one, high squeaky laughs and throaty coughs full of catarrh. "Oh! I do hope the piano will fit in the parlour."

"Well, it's so nice to meet you all," said Agnes with a thin grimace. She clutched Shuggie to her hip as she turned to leave.

"Oh, dinnae be like that. It's nice to meet you an' all, hen," wheezed Bridie, her hard face softening around the eyes from the good howling. "We're all like family here. We just don't get that many new faces."

The skull-faced woman took a step closer to Agnes. "Aye, well. We'll get on just fine." She sucked as though a piece of meat was stuck between her teeth. "Just as long as ye keep yer fancy sleeves away from our fuckin' men."

For the rest of the afternoon Shuggie walked the edge of the new scheme while the men unpacked the moving van. Women in tight leggings dragged kitchen chairs to their windows and sat watching, empty-faced, as box after box was unloaded. They had taken to greeting the boy with extravagant waves, doffing imaginary caps and then cackling to themselves.

In his new outfit he walked to the far end of the street. There was nothing out there. The street stopped at the edge of the peatbogs like it had given up. Dark pools of boggy water sat still and deep and scary-looking. Great forests of brown reeds shot up out of the grass and were slowly inching over the scheme, intent on taking it back from the miners.

Shuggie watched shoeless children playing in the snow. From the edge of a clutch of council bushes he pretended he was cataloguing some small red flowers, studying each for its size, while he waited for the children to ask him to join them. They were riding bikes in circles round each other and ignoring him. He popped the white berries between his fingers, trying to look casually disinterested, and then he tried to wipe the shine off his good shoes with the sticky juice.

The miners' tackety boots made sparks on the tarmac. The men slowly started drifting one by one along the empty road. There was no colliery whistle now; still the men were pushed along by the muscle memory of a dead routine, heading home at finishing time with nothing being finished, only a belly full of ale and a back cowed with worry. Their donkey jackets were clean and their boots were still shiny as they jerked along the road. Shuggie stepped back as they passed, their heads lowered like those of tired black mules. Without a word, each man collected a handful of thin children, who followed obediently, like reverential shadows.

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Agnes stood behind the front door and closed the large glass draught door ahead of her. She couldn't think. In the small pocket between the two doors she finished the can that she'd secreted in the bottom of her bag. She pressed her face against the wall, cold and soothing; the stone was thick and damp, and she could tell it would be slow to heat up.

She stood in the hiding place for a long while before she walked the length of the hallway, past two small bedrooms. Catherine was standing in the middle of the first, moving neither here nor there. The wild miners' weans were resting their elbows on the outside ledge and looking in the bedroom window at her like it was a zoo. Dumbfounded, she could only stare back. The wood-framed windows were poorly fitted, and the chipped glazing putty warned of cold nights and wet walls. Agnes could hear the weans talking as clearly as if they were in the room with her.

Leek had found the other room. He had opened the bag that kept his drawing supplies and was lying on the bare floor drawing a charcoal picture of the black hills. He took the edge of the pastel and drew the figures of the dark-jacketed men who had watched them as they arrived. They lined the mound of the hills like trees with no leaves. She watched her son, jealous of his talent to disappear, to float away and leave them all behind.

There were no more bedrooms after that. The third that they had been promised was clearly the living room, and as she retraced her steps, two and then three times, she knew all the children would need to be put together in one single room again.

Shug was standing at the end of the hallway looking blankly at her. His comb-over had been dancing in the wind, and he caught the waving strands and with a lick of spittle tried to smooth it back down over his head. He stepped back inside the open kitchenette and motioned for her to follow. The kitchen had a large clothes pulley hanging from the ceiling that looked like a tortoise rack. At the far end hung a set of miners' working clothes, neatly arranged to dry, from socks to white underwear to a blue polyester work shirt, all stiff with age. Would the