

## **Adelfine of the East Neuk**

A Fairy Story

*Stewart Ennis*

It was a dreich Glasgow summer day, pishing with rain, so it was. He was in a hellish mood. He'd been covering the opening of a new wing of the war veteran's hospital by some minor royal. Stories like these, honest to God, he could phone them in from bed. Wee Pride & Patriotism pieces. No empathy required. Just something that looks like it.

His café was closed because, who knows why? but he was drenched to the bone, so he went into the *City Art Centre*, a converted late Victorian tenement, self-consciously retaining the ghost of its slum dwelling past in one solitary distressed wall. It wasn't the only thing that was distressed. He cast a jaundiced eye over the place and its inhabitants. It was hoatching with everything he hated — and wasn't — the young, the pretty, the idealistic. He found an empty table, where he continued to nurse his wrath.

One good thing about the place was its collection of international journals. He skim-read a left-leaning magazine he'd heard of but never read, and a few minutes later he was sighing a loud sigh, reassured that there was still some decent journalism out there, depressed that he wasn't writing it. And that was the self-pitying state of mind he was in when she floated — that's how he remembered it — across the floor towards the empty chair.

He took in a novel's worth. Dark brown eyes. *Intelligent* eyes. Thick black hair. *Wild* hair. Small dark patch on the bridge of her slightly retroussé nose. Crooked canine. Clear skin! Oh my! Here was someone who'd never uttered the words, 'milk and two sugar.' She was probably ages with him, but much — *so much* — better kept.

-Sure, he said, nodding to the chair, desperately trying to suck his doggish malodour back up through his pores.

She picked up a foreign language newspaper with a headline photo of a glacier. He tried to read its title upside down but it made his head hurt. He kept glancing at her, willing her to glance back, but she was immersed in her glacier, drawing on it little dotted lines and arrows, scribbling words. Maybe she's on holiday, he thought. Alone in the city, in need of a friendly native to show her round, or recommend a cheap hotel, with a double bed. Maybe she's going

through a bad break-up, trying to put some distance between herself and some nasty piece of work; and looking for a bit of... He shook his head, appalled by this pitiful man who over these last few years had taken up residence. Is that what caught her attention? Because she was looking at him now, in a *what do we have here?* kind of way, and like a dog snatching a scrap he said,

-Where are you from?

-The East Neuk.

And that's when he decided to fall in love with her. The moment she said *Neuk*.

-You have a beautiful voice.

Name of God, had he said that? Out loud? She smiled. A hint of suspicion too, mind you, and quite right, the state of him. He raised his hand to his mouth, pretending to wipe something away, and smiled back. *My Scottish Teeth Shame* would be the title of that chapter.

-I've only said three words, she said with a foreigner's perfect diction.

-It was the third one that did it.

-*Neuk?*

*Yuk*, is what she should have said! Written him off as a slimeball. But no. Why? Because she was foreign? Because *he* was, for *her*? Exotic. Maybe she thought he was typical. *Oh these natives, what are they like?* and all that.

-What are you doing here? she said.

-Oof! Now you've done it. I can feel it kicking in. Imposter syndrome. Class warrior syndrome...

-Invasive species syndrome?

-Is it that obvious?... I just popped in to get out the rain. He sniffed the sleeve of his grey suit, so she'd know that he knew he was damp and smelly, -Bit arty for me, to be honest, he said, being honest.

She nodded and carried on with her glacial doodling, and he thought, well that's that. But it wasn't.

-So you won't want to see my exhibition?

The gallery was empty. On the walls were large square canvasses of ragged vertical stripes in muted reds, yellows, blues and greens; all frayed around the edges, and scrawled across the

surface those little dotted lines of hers, her symbols and arrows, and her foreign words, and so on. A wee bit oorie. A wee bit cheery.

-Well? First thoughts?

Twenty odd years on *The Gazette* had not equipped him for art criticism. He started mumbling random words, hoping they'd coalesce into something intelligent.

-Punch and Judy... a fairground... or... deckchairs... ragged deckchairs... I don't suppose you'd believe me if I told you I write for a living?

-Ragged deckchairs, yes! she said, clapping her hands and laughing.

Oh! He'd love to be able to do that; clap his hands and laugh when something delighted him. How do people...

-There's a beach where I live, she said. Every day during the summer this old man, Edward, puts out rows of deck chairs. I don't think anyone but me has hired one since the 1950s. I like to sit there like *von Auschenbach* waiting for my beautiful dream boy to come wading through the shallows.

*Dream boy?* He nodded like he knew what she was on about. It certainly wasn't him.

-I'm not filled with his melancholy though, she said. And I'm not sitting there waiting to die. I'm happy there. Wrapped in my shawl, flask of coffee, deckchair canvases flapping around me, the wind in my hair, the shadows in the haar.

It made him happy too, picturing her there, the beach, the hair, the haar, everything.

-What's with the dotted lines and all?

-Maps, she whispered.

-Right, he whispered. Of what?

-I'm not sure. And she drifted off somewhere inside herself for a moment. -What's your name?

-David.

-I'm Adelfine.

-?

She pointed to her name in big letters on the gallery wall. *Adelfine*. No surname. *Adelfine*. Her name. Her trademark.

-*Adel -fine*. he said, trying it out, -So you're famous?

-Oh yes. Look at the hordes of fans. I have so many red dots I thought there was something wrong with my eyes.

-Red dots?

-Under the canvases, when they're sold. I have *three*.

He looked again at her name, *Adelfine*, mouthing it silently.

-You're my first Adelfine.

-*Your* Adelfine? she said, mischief in her eyes, and... was he blushing?

-It's a Danish name.

-You're Danish?

-Well, born in Denmark, live in Sweden. My parents are Danish. ... *Were*.

He left a respectful pause, unsure whether they'd died that morning, or passed peacefully and elderly moons ago, then chanced his arm with some black Glasgow humour.

-*Were*? You mean... they're no longer Danish?

She laughed, a big beautiful head thrown back, open mouthed belly laugh. How was it possible, he thought, for a person to be so ...

-So what brought you to the East *Neuk*?

-I was washed ashore by the tide.

And Adelfine, whose name he could not yet pronounce, put her ice cold hands on his face and (it's a fairy tale) kissed him. Her hair smelt of woodsmoke and geraniums, and he felt himself swoon.

Her car was barely roadworthy. But it was nice being driven. It still had a cassette player and a stack of mix tapes, from friends, or lovers, or ex-lovers. Break-up tapes maybe. He wondered how long this thing — was this a thing? — would have to last before he was presented with a break-up tape. And what would be on it? Most of her music felt weird to his ears.

-What is that?

-Saxophone and whale song.

-Of course.

-Poor man. Am I scaring you off?

-No. Yes. ... No. No. It's good. ... It's like being abroad.

-You said you're a writer?

-Well ...a journalist.

-The honourable kind?

-Domestic hackwork. Hatches, matches and dispatches. *Parents Fear As Crack Appears in School Kitchen.*

She nodded, resisting his cynicism.

-That can be honourable.

-If you say so.

-What is it they say...the pen is mightier than the sword?

-Aye, maybe, if it's a big sharp pen.

-Don't put me off you. Not yet.

He didn't want to. But neither did he want her to think he was the guy in the white suit.

-What's your biggest scoop?

-Ooh, let me think. The last major international story I covered was... *Frog-Gate.*

-Frog... gate?

-*Frogs Found Dead in Local Pond*, he said in his best deadpan. -Headline news. Surely you must've read about it in Stockholm.

-When did this happen? she asked, again refusing to be dragged into his cesspool of sarcasm.

He should get out of this now, spare them both the agony, the awkwardness.

-It was last year.

-What happened, David?

*David. David*, she said. Out loud. Oh my. *David*. Such a powerful enchantment.

-A bunch of primary school kids had gone on a nature project to a local pond, only to discover that all the frogs had died. Or disappeared. Or, who knows. Some university eco-bod tested the water and found large quantities of something nasty. I was asked to cover it and take some pics.

-You're a photographer as well?

-Adelfine, can I apologize in advance —

-For what?

-For being the big disappointment you're about to discover me to be. ... They just hand you a wee point'n'shoot, or you use your phone. It's a rag. Honestly, they think *Magnum's* an ice cream and *Cartier-Bresson's* a wrist watch.

Don't, she was saying, without saying. Please. Don't. Just tell me the story.

-I'd got up at the crack of dawn to meet the newly formed *Friends of The Pond*. It was a cold morning, mist hanging over the water. Perfect weather for a minor apocalypse. The *Friends* were calling it "an environmental disaster". They wanted me to give their campaign legs, name and shame the council into action. All that. The council were shuffling their feet. They wanted the pond filled in. A few months before, a drunk 15 year old girl had fallen in and drowned. *She wouldn't have drowned if that pond hadn't been there!* Can't argue with logic, eh? So now it was about health and safety. But really, it was about wanting the land.

The pond folk had brought along some kids, which was good. It meant I could get a nice shot of them holding empty tadpole jars and looking tragic. The eco-bod was there too. She gave me a copy of her mind-bogglingly complicated water test results and a lecture on the importance of pond life in the grand Gaian scheme of things. I went through the motions, took notes, knowing fine well none of it would make it onto the page. They'd get, *Pond of Poison Kills Kermit*, a picture of a cute-sad kid, a second-hand quote from the council, and the time and place of the next *Friends* meeting. End of story.

Adelfine was near to tears.

-Heh! It wasn't fuckin' ... Bhopal, he said. It wasn't like Union Carbide! Know what I'm saying?

-Yes. I know what you're saying.

-I mean it wasn't the end of the world.

-No. But the beginning of the end. Maybe.

-For the frogs *maybe*. Or at least those particular frogs.

-Yes, certainly for those particular frogs.

Jeez, it was frogs. *Frogs!* But he so wanted their story to continue a wee while longer.

-Anyway, if you let me finish ... you'll be pleased to know that it all turned out to have a happy ending.

-?

-After the story came out, the council stepped up, found the source of the nasty stuff, and put a stop to it. Then a few months ago they came back. The frogs. And now ... it's all hunky dory in downtown Frogville.

Barely an hour and there it was, his first lie. A big lie too, because it was about something she cared about.

-See? A happy ending, he said, repeating the lie, wishing it was true.

And she was gazing at him like he was a hero. Terrible, so it was, just terrible.

Her seafront cottage was a thing of rustic beauty. Scattered around it were half a dozen beachcomber sculptures; skeletal, once-upon-a-time living creatures.

-They looked like they've been dredged out the Sargasso Sea.

-You know the Sargasso?

-Just the name.

-I have a story about the sea. Would you like to hear it?

-Is it a bed time story?

-It can be, yes.

There was a yellow kayak leaning against the gable end, with the words *Någon annanstans* painted on its side.

-It means *elsewhere*, she said. Or *somewhere else*. I bought it with some money my parents left me. *Någon annanstans* is where my mother and father longed to be. Always. Somewhere else. Anywhere else but home. I was the opposite, I was a ...a...

-A homebody!

-Yes. A home body. Exactly.

-And yet, here you are.

-Here I am.

-With me.

-With you. Home, and far from home; here, and somewhere else.

Inside was bright and airy. Everything — wooden floors, tables, chairs, doors — looked like they'd been bleach-blasted by salt sea winds. Canvasses, unfinished and finished variations on

Adelfine's theme, lay against walls. Driftwood and other assorted oceanic whigmaleeries hung from the rafters. The place was full of her. Then you could say that about anywhere, even his own flat; a sad empty shit hole, with all the atmosphere of a cold war safe house.

-Looks like you still are a home body.

-All of this came from the sea. One day it will go back to the sea. It won't be an emotional upheaval. She laughed. I get more like my parents every day. That longing to be...

-But not today, he said, not wanting to hear about that particular longing, not now.

-No, not today, she said, stroking the cheek of the insecure wee boy hiding inside the smelly grey suit of a misanthropic grown up. Not tomorrow. And not the day after.

He didn't realise it, but the 72 hour clock had already started ticking.

They both knew what was going to unfold; there was no need to rush anything. They had a shower, she made pot of green tea, and they went to bed. She laughed when he asked for sugar in his green tea, and gave him honey. They drank from chipped mugs — hers blue, his green — *their* mugs for today, tomorrow and the day after. And she told him her bedtime story...

-My mother and father were obsessed with kayaking. They had these ancient folding sea kayaks. It's how they met, as teenagers, at Grenen, in the far north of Denmark, where the two oceans meet, the Skagerrak and Kattegat. Two happy contented loners who fell in love and became a pair of happy contented loners. They'd go kayaking in separate kayaks. On the same coast or river, to begin with. Then mum would head off down some tributary or around an island that took her fancy, dad would head to another, and three days later they'd meet up at some designated place, and share together what they'd experienced alone.

When I was a baby we moved to Sweden, but we'd go back to Denmark all the time. We were always on the water. To begin with I'd kayak with mum, while dad went off on his solitary adventure. But by thirteen I was going solo, setting up camps on my own. For some couples a child completes a family, but I'm not sure I completed anything. I simply became the third happy contented loner.

We often talked about kayaking around the Åland Islands, between Sweden and Finland. There are thousands of them. So when I announced I was going to art school in Scotland, we decided to do it that summer. Our last big adventure. For a while anyway.

It was a beautiful morning. The three of us couldn't have been in better spirits. The waters around the islands are the safest you can find, especially in summer. And that day the conditions were perfect. Blue skies. Green glass sea. And good omens everywhere. A pair of seals came out to greet us. We saw a havsörn with a fish in its talons. After a while we split up, mum paddling towards this island, dad towards that, I towards another; never a backward glance. As always. All of us happy and content. Why should it be different this time?

The police searched for a few weeks. I went back every year for the next few years. I knew I'd never find them. But I hoped I might find something.

Next morning he phoned *The Gazette*, said he had the flu. His voice was trembling with lust, and laughter. She was laughing too. There was a lot of that. Sex and laughter. What a brilliant combination. Why hadn't he tried it before?

They were together three days. *Today, tomorrow, and the day after.*

When he awoke, on the fourth day, Adelfine, and her kayak, were gone. No note.

The deckchairs were out. He put a pound in the honesty box, and chose himself a front row seat. As he sat there, looking through the thinning haar, towards a still invisible horizon, his thoughts flitted between *why?* and *of course*. He stayed until evening, just in case. He didn't call the police. Why would he? She wasn't missing. She was somewhere. Elsewhere. Någon annanstans.

A few days later he revisited *Frog-Gate*. He thought he'd take another look at the pond, write another story. Or at least an update. But the story had already written itself. There was a wee boy there with his mother.

-Mum, look!

He was holding a plump frog in his cupped hands.

-Oh my, that's a beauty.

-Can I keep it?

-It's a wild thing, love. You can't keep wild things.

-Can I stroke it?

-If you're gentle.

Fiction: *Adelfine of the East Neuk* by Stewart Ennis

-Can I give it a secret name? A fairy name?

The wee boy whispered to his frog, its secret fairy name, and returned it to the pond.

**Stewart Ennis** lives in Glasgow. He was a prison creative writing tutor and edited *Visiting Time*, an anthology of prison writing. He currently co-edits *Causeway/Cabhsair* (Aberdeen University Press). He's written several plays and his stories and poems have appeared in various anthologies. His novel *Blessed Assurance* was published in 2019. In 2020 he was awarded an Aberdeen-Curtin Alliance PhD scholarship in creative writing.