Auld Tup

By Alexander Saxton

The village was called ‘Twa Corbies’, and you won’t find it on a map.

It must have been incorporated into some other parish since then, but I couldn’t even tell you whether it was in England or Scotland, Northumberland or Cumbria. Maybe things have changed now, with the internet, but when I was there, I don’t think the people even cared. They were in Twa Corbies. They’d always been in Twa Corbies.

It was the day before Christmas Eve, 1976. Unable to afford the flight back to Canada, I was using my holiday to drive north and visit my great-grandmother, who was mouldering in a Dumfries retirement facility called ‘Sail Away’. Every time I think about it, the Enya song plays in my head. ‘Sail Away, Sail Away, Sail Away,’ even though the single wouldn’t be released for another 12 years.

But I wasn’t going to make it that night. Lost in the hills after dark, I’d only just managed to get the steaming wreckage of my car down to the edge of town.

Twa Corbies. Population, what, 70? If that? It was a cluster of low stone houses, huddled down against the winds that howled from the uplands. A crumbling macadam road slouched through it, winding under the bulk of billion-year-old hills. At the town’s single intersection, a single, orange streetlight flickered in the wind. It wasn’t quite snowing, but the wind carried a cold grit that stung the cheeks.

One building in the town had lights on. It seemed to be a pub-slash-inn called, of all things, The Twa Corbies, which is to say, ‘the two crows’ in local dialect. Black paint flaked from the two crows painted underneath the name, and above the entrance, which was half-sunk in the ground. You had to climb down four steps to get to it, and the door only stood about five feet high.

When I ducked inside, the whole place turned to look at me. A half-dozen men, at various tables or by the bar. They all looked the same: wind-leathered, and dressed in grimy, thick tweed jackets and caps. They all could have been related. The faces in the town all had the same narrow, distrustful build.

I didn’t like the look of them, and at the time, I wasn’t sure why. Now, years later, I think I’ve learned enough about myself to understand. I think the reason for my instinctive dislike is that the people of Twa Corbies all had faces that reminded me of one I had grown up hating: my father’s face, which was also the one I saw each time I looked in the mirror.

I nodded to the barflies and grunted. They turned aside, back to their muttered conversations or muted thoughts. But as I walked past and pulled up a dismal stool at the bar, I could feel their suspicion, could feel the occasional flick of their dark eyes toward me.

The barman clumped a mug of flat brown ale down in front of me. He did it without asking; I supposed it was the only thing they served. If he noticed any resemblance between us, he didn't comment on it. Maybe he had only ever seen people from Twa Corbies. Maybe he assumed this was just what people looked like.
"'s a cowl nigh'," he said.
"Uh-huh," I said. "Still beats Winnipeg."
He had no response to that. Maybe he didn't know what Winnipeg was. Maybe he found my accent as hard as I found his. I'm not doing it justice. I've heard that, during the war, certain British Airmen from the North were able to limp through conversation with the locals when they were stationed in Iceland. I believe it. Every time one of us said something, the other would have to get them to repeat it two or three times.
"Where 'e from, then," he said. "Lunden?"
I laughed at that. People in London treated my accent like a bizarre curiosity.
"No. Canada," I said.
He nodded, as though that finally told him everything he needed to know about me.
"Jus' outside o Lunden then. Car broke down?"
I nodded.
He nodded. It was an easier way to understand each other than speaking.
'Sthe only reason outsiders come t' Twa."
He jerked his chin at a man in the corner.
"Huw'll fix't i'the moarnin'. Y'c'n stay upstairs tonight. But's a seelie wyrd t'bring ye here on Tup's Eve."
I grunted. I had no idea what that last part meant, but pretended I did.

Now, I do know what it meant. Sort of. What he meant was, it was a strange fate that brought me there on the evening of Old Tup.

As I sat there, drinking my beer and wishing somebody had invented smartphones so I'd have something to look at, a sound started to ring against the sidewalk outside.

Tup, tup, tup, a hollow, wooden noise.

Silently, as one, the men in the bar turned in their seats to look at the door.

Tup, tup, tup. Whatever was making that noise was coming down the stairs.

The wind was howling outside. The door creaked open halfway, and then the wind caught it, slamming it back against the wall.

A figure stood framed in the door, backlit by the orange flicker of that one streetlight.

It was about half the height of a man. Its head was lopsided, carved from wood with jaws that clacked in the silence of the Corbie. Ram's horns curled from above its beady little eyes, and a grey old fleece hung over its back.

It was supported by a wooden limb, and two human legs. I realized it was a man in costume, bent double, using a short wooden staff to support the front of his body.

An appreciative noise went up from the men in the room.

"Ah, Tup," they said. "It's Tup, aright."

More figures crowded into the door. There was a man dressed as a butcher, a man dressed as a female prostitute, and a little boy holding a wooden bowl, who was dressed like a devil. In the midst of them, the tallest figure stood with his hand on the back of Tup's neck. He was dressed all in black, with his face painted black, and a pair of horns rising from the side of his head. Across the top half of his face, he wore a wooden mask that had been carved and painted to resemble the blue-green compound eyes of a fly.

"Maght we com oop in," said the man.

"Aye, let 'im in, let 'im in," cried some of the men in the bar. But others said, "Nay, nay now, that's Beelzebub, let 'im nowt coom op in."

The words sounded scripted to me, or else memorized by rote, set down by long tradition. I might have expected some joy or laughter at the ritual, but there was none. The men in the inn cried out their lines with the same leathery indifference that they did everything else. Silence fell, and all eyes turned to the bar-keep.

"Aye," he said at last. "Aye now, com oop in, Beelzebub, com oop in, Butcher, com oop in Tibs and Little Devil Doubt. Com oop in, Old Tup."

The people at the door crowded in. I tried to meet the barkeep's eye with a questioning glance, but he pretended not to notice. Tup remained in the door as the others filed past him. The man in women's clothes came to stand closest to me, his face a garishly painted caricature of my own. I had trans friends in the City, though at the time we used worse terms. I wondered if I should be offended on their behalf, and didn't even come close to an answer.

A silence fell. Tup's wooden leg lifted off the ground and moved forward, over the threshold.

Tup.

The back legs hopped over, and the pantomime ram moved into the centre of the room.

Tup tup, tup.

By some invisible signal, everybody started singing.

“As I went down to Twa Corbies, all of a market day,
I met the biggest ram, my boys, that ever fed on hay.

The horns that grew on this ram's head, they grew so very long,
And every time he shook his head they rattled ‘gainst the sonne.

Now this old ram, he had a tail that reached right down to hell,
And every time he waggled it he rung the old church bell.

As the men sang, the little boy, Little Devil Doubt, as they called him, scurried around the room with his wooden bowl. Every person he visited threw a couple of coins into it. When he came to me, I noticed they were all old currency: shillings, florins, and half-crowns. All I had were the new 5 and 10 cent pieces, which, when I threw them into the bowl, the boy looked at, shook his head, and then gave back. The song went on:

“The butcher that stuck this ram, my lads, was op to knees in blood,
And the little boy who held the bowl was carried away by the flood.

Took all the boys in Corbies to carry way his bones,
Took all the girls in Corbies to roll away his stones

The butcher that stuck this ram, my lads, was op to knees in blood,
And the little boy who held the bowl was carried away by the flood.”

As the singing came to an end, a moment of silence fell, and then the Ram bust into motion. Kicking and leaping, Old Tup began to run around the room, crashing into people, and knocking over chairs and tables.

“Hie, Tup,” cried the men. “Back, then back, then, Tup,” as the figure ran at them. But they didn’t seem to feel any actual panic. Again, their reaction was formalized, set down in stone centuries before their births. I hadn’t been expecting the ram to jump at me, a stranger, but when it did, I yelled, and jumped around the corner of the bar. The puppet’s jaws clacked shut on my hand, stinging, and leaving a bruise that took several days to heal. But then it leaped on, jumping past Beelzebub and Tibs, to terrorize the other guests.

“Hie, Tup!” Shouted a voice.

Silence fell again. It was the butcher. Old Tup turned to face him, and all the other men in the room slowly moved back into a circle to watch what happened next.

The pantomime ram charged toward the butcher, who made a show of jumping to the side, so the ram crashed into the bar: a display of slapstick that nobody laughed, or even smiled at. Then the butcher chased Tup down to the other end of the room, and Tup chased the butcher back up to the bar, crashing into it again.

The entire spectacle was ridiculous. In any other context, it would have been funny, but the bored, solemn faces of the townsfolk took any joy out of it. I felt the hair rising on the back of my neck.

The butcher pulled out his butcher's knife, and chased Old Tup back up the room.

"Aye," murmured the men. "Aye, butcher, 'tis time an' all."

This time, the butcher caught Tup, and held him in a headlock. The two engaged in a ritualized struggle back and forth.

And then something unexpected happened.

The butcher reached back and plunged the knife into Tup's hindquarters, where the anus would have been under the fleece. This, at last, raised an appreciative chuckle from the audience, and Tup lurched back and forth, pantomiming the death throes of the ram.

I wasn't sure how they'd done it. A prop knife and squib? The butcher's arm turned crimson as he sawed back and forth, and a real smell of raw meat and fecal matter filled the air, but it *had* to be staged, because the man in the ram's costume made no noise, and continued to act his part. There were sheep pens beside the bar: Corbies was the type of town where a bag of bloody sheep-chitterlings was easily come-by, and there was room enough to hide them under Tup's ratty skin.

I found myself staring into the beady eyes of the Ram mask, and because of the context, my brain conjured a pareidolia, and thought it recognized panic and fear in those empty pellets of black glass. What did the real eyes, the human eyes look like underneath that wooden mask? Were they laughing at the farce? But no, they couldn't have been: even staged, it must have been humiliating and uncomfortable to play Old Tup.

I wanted to look aside, but found it impossible to rip my gaze away. I felt light-headed, but seemed to be the only one. Even Little Devil Doubt seemed unaffected by the spectacle, as he ran up to fill his bowl with spraying blood and offal, until the coins floated.

At last, lifting a theatrical arm, the pantomime ram rolled over and lay still. The other four players squelched through the blood until they formed a line, and bowed. A round of polite applause rose from the townsfolk, who then turned back to their ale, their muttered conversations, and muted thoughts.

Without another word, Tibs, the Butcher, Beelzebub, and Little Devil Doubt processed out the door, leaving Old Tup crumpled where he lay.

I turned back to my drink, unsure of what I had just seen. That smell still filled the room. It was unthinkable.

“Aye,” said the barkeep. “Twas seelie wyrd what broght ye here on Tup’s Eve.”

I nodded, draining the last of my ale. He re-filled my mug and refused to accept money.

“Nay, you’re a guest here, nou.” He said.

I nodded, and drank.

“That… play,” I said. “What did it represent?”

He frowned at me and tilted his head. I repeated the question, but it seemed he’d understood my words, but not their meaning.

“‘Present?” he said. “nay, Lunden. It representet nowt. Tis just only the Old Tup.”

I wasn’t able to get a more sensible answer out of him after that.

Later on, drunk, and feeling surreal, I headed out the door to get my things from the car. Old Tup was still laying there, where the players had left him.

“A real method actor,” I murmured to myself. But when I nudged the mask with my foot, it lolled away, revealing a man’s face. His eyes were wide and staring. His skin had gone pale. Undoubtedly, he was dead. Like his killer, he looked like everyone else in the village. He looked like me. I didn’t glance under the ragged red back of the fleece. It had been a real knife; a real knife. I didn’t want to see what it had done.

“Worry nowt bout tha’”, called the barkeep. ““Huw’ll clean’t oop i’the moarnin’.

I nodded, I grunted. When I got outside, I scrubbed most of the blood from my shoes by scuffing them in the gravel. I looked around. Beyond the pool of orange light, the howling darkness of the hill country spread in all directions.

What else could I have done? There was nowhere to go. I got my things. I stayed the night. In the morning, Huw fixed up my car, and I drove to Dumfries. When I phoned the police, the man on the other end of the line listened politely, asked if I'd been drinking the night before, and suggested I'd been mistaken. I became agitated, and he calmed me down, saying he'd 'call it in'. Whatever that meant.

What else could I have done? There was nowhere to go. I made my visit. I sailed in to Sail Away Retirement Community, where an old woman with my own face kept saying how nice it was that I had come to visit, but that I should go, because her grandson was coming up for Christmas Eve. I drove back south and finished out my contract. I moved back home.

There's one more thing, though, that sticks out in my memory about that trip. It happened as I was putting on my coat at Sail Away, and the sun was going down, and my grandmother was sundowning.

She started humming to herself as old folks will: some tune, probably, from her vanished, half-forgotten early years.

And as she hummed, it came to me that I knew the words to this tune, and sang it to myself on my way down the gravel path to my car.

"As I went down to Twa Corbies, all of a market day,
I met the biggest ram, my boys, that ever fed on hay.

It was Twa Corbies. It had always been Twa Corbies.