

I hadn't been able to take the Edinburgh OS map out of the Exeter library, but had printed some googlemaps. As usual, I wished I had printed out some more. I kept my eyes peeled for a B-road which served as a ring road around southwest Edinburgh and led right to where I was staying in Colinton. Either it didn't exist or my glasses had too many speckles of mud decorating them because I never spotted it. By the time I'd realised that I'd passed it I had dropped about 150 metres down a hill. Funny how you don't notice that you've missed your turn when you're hurtling down a hill and surfing green wave of traffic lights. The turn was as clear as the nose on my face when I limped back up the hill. Before long I had found Fernielaw Avenue, where I'd be staying the night.

My Australian friend Rowan had set me up with the McKees, Ian and Penny, who lived in a gorgeous Georgian house at the foot of the Pentland Hills. Ian McKee had been the best friend of Rowan's dad when they were in med school. Now he was a Scottish MSP for the Scottish National Party, an interesting career path for a doctor from South Shields. It was a bit odd for me, a fairly ardent Canadian federalist, to be staying with an elected member of an independence party, but Scotland, though sharing an awful lot with Quebec, was also very different. It was a small nation on the periphery of a continent of small independent nations, not a small nation on the periphery of a continent of monoliths, and the only one to speak French to boot.

I found out later from Ian that their three story yellow house would have been the sole dwelling in the little close until the early twentieth century. It oozed class and made it hard for me to imagine that I had slept in a youth hostel the night before. When I rolled up at about 3 pm and knocked on the big black door no one answered. I walked around to the back and found the garden to be empty as well. I was parched, having run out of water some time after lunch. I noticed a garden hose hung up on the side of the house and decided to test Murphy's Law - as soon as I started sucking onto the end of it, Penny McKee would show up. It very nearly worked. Seconds after I hung the hose back up on its hook, water dripping down my beard and onto my shirt, she drove up. I was suddenly conscious that I hadn't shaved for weeks, had bike grease and mud all over my bare legs and, despite the miraculous qualities of merino wool, I probably smelled like an unwashed pen of nervous sheep. Even though my bike shoes had touched precious little but my pedals, I insisted on taking them off when Penny ushered me inside. She showed me my room, which was up on the top floor and very close to the shower.

I did my best to scrub the grease off my legs and the grime off the rest of me. When I went downstairs, Penny was on the phone, so I made myself at home in the kitchen. 'Feel free to make

yourself some tea or coffee', she called out from the living room, so I found the kettle and filled it up. When I found the correct fridge for milk - there were two - I noticed some delectable chocolate eclairs perched on the middle shelf. The ten-year-old in me reached out to take one - he was forever doing that - but the thirty-something in me held back, hoping that they'd be offered at some point in the near future. Right on cue, Penny called out again, 'There should be some eclairs in the fridge. Help yourself!' Good things come to those who wait. I had two.

I sat at the massive kitchen table, eating my snack and quite pleased with myself. Penny soon came in and made herself some coffee. She was very friendly and hospitable - all of the warmth and consideration of someone who entertained important people often, with none of the haughtiness of someone who could have considered herself quite a ways up the Scottish social ladder. We chatted about a wedding in Canmore, Alberta that she'd been invited to, but probably would not be able to make, and a host of other things, and soon Ian was walking through the door.

I'd met a few Alberta politicians in my time, but luckily he wasn't much like any of them - a very good thing as far as I was concerned. Ian and Penny had both been physicians, but had transitioned nicely into public life. We had just started chatting about my interest in the history of medicine when the doorbell rang. 'Oh!' Penny said, 'That must be the man who is to be looking at the roof. He should have been here an hour ago.' Ian strode off the door and Penny turned to me. 'You might find this interesting.'

I followed them to the door and was greeted by a portly man who was panting heavily and beaded with sweat. This was a bit odd considering he had just got out of his van. 'Ah'm so sorry ah'm late! It's been mad, I tell ye, mad! I've nae been off me feet all day. Noo what d'ye want me to look at?'

Ian took him around to the back and Penny and I followed. 'I think he's been at the sauce!' Penny whispered mischievously, strangely delighted at the possibility. We went round and received a five minute lecture on roofs, rain, gutters and global warming. It was quite impressive. The roof man spluttered ferociously and seemed to sweat more and more as he continued. He waxed eloquent about the importance of rigorous roof maintenance and then bemoaned that the increasingly fierce storms were making his job 'a wee bit of a misery'. 'But good for business?' Penny ventured helpfully. 'Aye, but cruel hard work, too.' He eyed Penny up, 'And what does a woman know about either, any road?'

Many a woman, particularly accomplished MDs like Penny, would have issued a vitriolic attack to such a comment that might have sent the chubby roof man sprinting back to his van like Usain Bolt on amphetamines. But Penny just laughed it off as gaily as could be. ‘Unfortunately’, Roofman admitted, ‘I’ve nae the proper tools tae get up to where I can see the problem. Is it okay if I came back?’ Penny and Ian’s eyes rolled at one another. ‘Sure that’s fine’, Ian said in an accent that seemed positively southern compared to the Roofman’s brogue. ‘No problem at all.’

As Roofman huffed and puffed back to his van, I marvelled at the serenity with which Ian and Penny dealt with the less than helpful tradesman. Not being particularly concerned with money might have been part of it, and possibly Roofman was a SNP voter, but there was a peaceful satisfaction that emanated from both of them. They were clearly very happy.

After Roofman left, and we retired to a sun house in the front garden to polish off the eclairs, Ian admitted that he was mildly annoyed, but I got the feeling that other matters stoked his passions. Following a lovely dinner of pork, veggies and potatoes, I got a sense of these other passions. Certainly independence for Scotland was one of them. The SNP, an ‘independence’ not a ‘separatist’ party, he corrected me, was committed to seeing Scotland go its own way. I was interested that most of the arguments Ian, a former Tory voter, used were economic and political, rather than the cultural and nationalistic arguments you hear in Quebec, but as Ian said, ‘every independence party is different’. They are, I thought, but they also had one big thing in common: an unrelenting drive, which often dominated their members’ lives, to assert their right to be different and free. As an English Canadian, even one from a province that has had its own ridiculous separatist party, I can honestly state that I’ve never felt this desire. But if 1812 had gone down differently and we were the 51st state, well...

Ian took me on a walk up into the Pentland Hills behind his house after dessert. The sun was sinking, giving the heather a golden glow - the ‘western light’, according to Ian. There were tremendous views of Edinburgh and the Firth of Forth. Near the top were a pair of reservoirs that had been marvels of Victorian engineering. The temperature was cooling off a touch - the light rain that I had cycled through had given way to warm sunny spells almost as soon as I had got off my bike - but it would have been amazing to jump in and have a splash. Ian talked a bit about how he got into politics and why he wished he’d made his own leap a few years earlier. We also discussed football and his team, the recently relegated Newcastle United, a team I used to like before I tied the knot with Exeter City, which also played at a St. James Park. I didn’t ask why he still supported an English team, albeit one close to the border, but with football rivalries in Scotland as fierce as they

are, maybe it was wise not to automatically alienate half your constituents. Plus, football allegiances are often stronger than national ones; I recall Wayne Rooney saying that he'd prefer the Champions' League trophy to the World Cup. Of course, when you're playing for England, that's the only decision that will avoid disappointment.

It was fairly dark by the time we got back. We'd probably walked five miles and up 200 metres - not the smartest way to rest up for a 110 miles trek into the Highlands, but the views, Edinburgh's lights, the inky Forth, Arthur's Seat a little bump on the horizon, were worth it. After a quick night cap, whisky of course, I headed up to my top floor bedroom, my legs feeling the walk a wee bit, and plummeted into a deep sleep.