

# **An Afternoon**

**By Ian Rankin**

After a hard afternoon of being spat upon and having coins tossed at him, Rab, known to the younger constables as Big Rab, eased his boots from his blistered feet and massaged the yellow, dampened skin.

'My feet look like the jaundice,' he thought to himself. He could smell the vinegary sweat rising from his soles. He'd soak them tonight when he got home. They stuck like limpets to the cooling linoleum when he padded to his locker. The locker was tarnished green, slivers of metal showing through its several chips and scratches.

'It wis a hard one, Big Rab, wasn't it?' McNulty was running the cold tap over a clump of paper towels. He rubbed them vigorously over the pockmarks on the back of his official-issue overcoat.

'They don't get any easier,' said Rab. He examined his own coat now; sure enough, there they were, as if dried chewing-gum had been picked off the material or a pigeon had dropped its unerring load or a snail had paused for a rest. Rab's face twisted into a silent sneer. It went beyond revulsion, what he was feeling. It approached boredom. All part and parcel of the job, his own sergeant had said... what? Thirty years ago now? Part and parcel of the job.

Yes, thirty years next month since he had joined the force. Over fifteen hundred weeks on the beat and never a day sick in all that time. Still, he was beginning to worry about those dizzy spells. But it would be defeat to see the doctor now, after all these years. It would be the crumbling of a powerful myth. It was nothing anyway.

He looked across to McNulty. He, Rab, was the sergeant now and McNulty was the young man with patches of acne on his neck where the razor had scraped. Rab shook his coat. It jangled. He began to smile.

'Sounds good today,' said McNulty.

'Well,' said Rab, 'it might not all be clean, but it's all money. It's as good as anybody's.'

'One of these days...'

Rab looked at the genuine concern on the young man's face. 'Laddie,' he said, slapping his ample girth, 'if they can't hit this, they can't hit anything. And the more roused they get themselves, the bigger the coins they throw.'

McNulty managed a smile and unclipped his tie. Some of the others were coming in now, faces ruddy with exhaustion.

'Another big game will be the death of me,' someone was saying.

'Twenty-one arrests so far.'

'My money's on thirty by half-past.'

'Thirty-five?' added a new voice.

'Done: five quid?' The two men shook hands. Rab was examining his pale face in the cracked mirror on his locket. He tried to see behind his eyes, but the reflection was giving nothing away.

It had been the same as usual, nothing out of the ordinary. Days like that made you worse somehow, made you lax.

The searches at the turnstiles had produced a few foolhardy bottles and cans, a soldering-iron, two tins of spray-paint and a homemade metal catapult. The terraces began to fill with that curious mix of the honest, stout-hearted football fans, the bored kids and spouses, and the real trouble-makers. They were out in force today. Rab was stationed at the area behind one goalmouth. He watched the crowd swell.

'Ninety minutes,' he thought, 'just let me get through another ninety minutes.'

Plus half-time... added time... and the various flash-points along the way.

The first coin whistled silently, but obviously, past his ear and bounced in the grass. A close one, and still five minutes to kick-off. He stared at the sea of faces, studying them through the thick mesh of the fence. They seemed normal enough in appearance, shuffling their feet to keep warm. A day's bristle, hair shoulder-length: manual workers mostly, coming to a game as other people attended church. Just a reaction, a part of their lives. But he knew that surfaces were often broiling underneath; knew the subtleties of violence.

When the roar goes up, he knows that the teams are coming on to the pitch. He thinks he recognises a couple of faces in the crowd, but his eyesight is not what it was; he cannot focus more than halfway up the terracing.

He can see the lunatics soon enough though. They want to be seen, then repay his attention with the full array of gestures. Do they really hate him? He's old enough to be their father, maybe even grandfather. Thirty years of watching them mature as a tribe into the animals they've now become.

The whistle blows, the booming, indecipherable noise from the public address system dies, and all eyes are suddenly moving like a symphony. Rab almost smiles, but that,

he knows, would be a weakness. So he watches as mouths purse at the same time, hands come together in a supportive show of strength. The faces have become a single force.

Then comes the first foul against one of their team. Their faces tighten, fists shake, rigid fingers point accusingly, arms heaving over the shoulder of the person in front. A sudden cheer. 'Thank God,' thinks Rab: 'the Ref's booked some bugger.' Honour is satisfied for the moment and the crowd eases back.

It is seven minutes past three.

The sun appears to be shining through a sky made of milk. Seagulls from the nearby dump float overhead like small aircraft. It has been a subdued first half so far, which has prompted the lunatics to begin an entertainment of their own. They start swaying to and fro, attempting a whiplash effect in the dense crowd. Two small boys have to be helped out through the metal gate in the fence and on to the grit-track. One of them is recovering from a faint. He holds the sleek hair away from his forehead and takes in tiny gulps of air. His friend slides his arm around him halfway.

While Rab watches these youngsters, more coins miss their mark. A ballboy, his partisan presence taunting the crowd, deftly begins to pick the coins up and pockets them. This incenses the crowd, who throw ever more and faster missiles. But the faster they are, the less accurate, and with a measure of luck and a full set of wits, neither of the slowly-moving targets is hit.

At half-time a smoke-bomb goes off in the crowd and a small fire starts. Rab is given the nod, and eight of them move in a line through the gate and into the dense pack of supporters. They face the front, the absolute future, without any hesitation. Rab knows

that to look back is to show fear. To look back is to see the raw hate, the silent insults, the flurry of spittle which has now started landing on his back.

The fire is out when they get there. Two drunken skinheads are pointed to from nearby, the informant making himself quickly anonymous again afterwards. The line of dark shapes forms itself around the trouble-makers and they are noisily arrested. Rab knows now that only their bottle, their absolute determination, is going to stop the crowd from turning on them. If one of the younger uniforms should crack, they'd be lost in a moment. The skinheads are led towards the fence. Rab allows himself a glance up at the pitch as they work their way forwards and down. It is a plain of lush green. Around it shuffle the mass of spectators, and at its centre sits the white dot from where the game commences.

The skinheads raise their arms and begin to chant, the sound welling around them as others join in. A hissing and whistling from the opposite end of the ground tells them they can be heard. The sound grows louder, filling Rab's ears, making him dizzy and afraid in the midst of it all. The pitch blurs as his eyes start to water. He blinks them clear. There is cool dampness on his back, within his shirt.

By the end of the match, he has been twice more into the crowd. He stays behind the net after the final whistle, until the terracing has emptied. Hoarse songs echo along the streets outside, cans clatter into gutters. Rab studies the three stripes on his arm, the tight threads of white cotton which are his rank, his whole adult life. Thirty years. Gulls shrieking overhead, landing on the muddied pitch. Floodlights caught against the deepening blue of evening.

Thirty years.

The ball-boy is standing in front of him, holding a pile of coins which he offers to the burly, oversized man in uniform. 'Half for you,' he says. 'Fair?'

'As ever,' Rab says. 'I'll see they go to a good cause.'

The money, as it does every week that Rab patrols this ground with this boy, changes hands. Rab feels the usual twinge of guilt, seeing himself as the performing monkey to the wee lad's spiv.

The boy turns and marches off the field, and Rab smiles, his jaw cracking open as if nearly welded shut from an afternoon's rigorous abstention. Time to go. One of these days a coin may hit him and he'll have to make an appointment. One day, but not this one. He pockets the handful of missiles and they become money again.

Leaving the park, he notices a small, dull-brown coin that has gone unnoticed against the matted blades of grass. He stoops to pocket it, and the world rushes into his ears, filling his head with the chant of the tribe. 'Easy, easy,' they're yelling. The sea is crashing down over the seagulls and the grass. One floodlight is turned off, and then another. 'Easy, easy' in his ears and the coin between his outstretched fingers as his vision blurs again. He staggers a little but manages to straighten up, looks round to make sure no one's noticed. The roar is subsiding, the breath coming cold from his lips. He makes for the relative safety of his station.

© Ian Rankin, 2003

