

14<sup>th</sup> January 2026

## Plunge

“I wandered lonely as a cloud ...”

William Wordsworth, *I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud*

In 1973 when I was on the “new members’ programme” before I became a member of the Iona Community, a number of us were sent on an “Urban Plunge”. This consisted of being transported in the early hours of the morning to a random town in central Scotland, being given the daily “dossier’s allowance” (a subsistence payment for homeless people), a local address (only to be used in emergencies), and an instruction to “live by your wits” until the evening of the following day. It was a challenging and formative experience, which would take more than a page to describe.

But reflecting on it recently (because it’s still vivid in my memory, 53 years later) I wrote this short story, with this thought: even under a darkening cloud, there is always a glimmer of hope.

“I wandered lonely”, in a daffodil-free zone, for there were no spring blooms in Perth in July. There *was* a cloud though – a big, black, personal one. An “urban plunge”, a thirty-six hour “living on the streets” exercise, “understanding how the other half live”, kind of thing. A random town; 8am; fend-for-yourself till 8pm the following day; a handful of coins and bugger-all else. “You’re on your own.”

The cloud appeared early; “lonely”, right enough; everyone a stranger; no one giving a damn. It deepened mid-evening, as I rummaged for food in a bin and after I’d sneaked into the movies without paying, scared I’d be rumbled. It blackened into terror, in a building-site, dossing in a half-finished house. Rats! Scuttling and scraping all night. No sleep. Mid-afternoon day two, the cloud was permanent. I found a park bench. I needed to cry alone. But, damn! – a wee woman joined me, trachled, dumping two cavernous shopping bags at her feet.

“See me? This is me a’ day,” she sighed, lighting a roll-up. “Are you homeless, son?”

I nodded – trying to stay in living-on-the-streets character.

“Want a draw o’ ma fag, son?”

I declined.

“C’mon, then. You look like you could dae wi’ a wee cup-a-tea.”

We had a *Big Mac* with the tea. The wee wifie talked. “Ah wis oan the streets tae, son. Wi’ the drink, ken? Naeb’dy gave a shit. An’ wan day, a wee laddie cam ower, like yersel’, nae age. ‘C’mon, missus,’ he sez. ‘Ah’ll treat ye at *McDonalds*.’ An’ he did. That wis the start o’ it, me pullin’ masel thegither, eh? An’ noo, ah’m jist returnin’ the favour. Dae untae ithers, ken?”

I carried her two bags to the bus-stop, as the sun broke through the clouds.

### A prayer for today

*Help me keep hopeful in the darkest days; and help me give hope to those around me.*