



a dance called armageddon

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MacLeod said he found the anthology's theme hard to get a handle on—for political reasons. "I don't actually have a great deal of hope for positive change in the near future," he said. "I only found the story when I chose to write out of that pessimism."



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Iwalk fast up the North Bridge under a sky yellow with city light on low cloud. The streets are almost empty. Even for the fifteenth winter of the Faith War, it's quiet. Everyone on the street seems to have tense shoulders and wary eyes. For the past week, all the talking heads have been telling us the current battle's going to be decisive, it's going to be the big one, and right now they're telling us it's not looking good.

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I'm out on the town because I don't want to sit alone at home. But as I stride along I can't help watching the news on my glasses. The picture flickers in the corner of my eye, the sound murmurs in the earpieces. Even on Fox News, the commentators and retired generals are all taking care not to call what's going on Armageddon. They are, presumably, trying not to make the panic worse than it is already. America is going into national nervous breakdown from coast to coast: fires, riots, entire football stadiums packed with swaying, sobbing people waiting for the Rapture or the Second Coming.

My wife's working nights at the hospital, hauled out of retirement to help cope with the rising flood of casualties flown in from the big medevac staging areas on Cyprus and Crete. Here in the UK—unlike the US, with two million so far thrown into the meat-grinder of the Middle East and Central Asia—we don't have the draft. But every medical worker knows they'll be on call until they die.

I walk in to the Heart of Oak and my glasses steam up. I take them off and slip them in their pouch inside my shirt pocket, taking more than usual care because I've only just got them, a Sony Ericsson Cyber-sight upgrade. I idly wonder whether it would be possible to give glasses a heating element, just so they don't steam up when you step from a cold night into a warm and crowded pub. That would be a sight more useful, so to speak, than the menu of VR games bundled with my new specs. It might even be more useful than television.

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The room's so small I hardly need my glasses to see everyone in it, and I give them all a big grin. Whether I know them or not, I know who they are. They look familiar. They look like me.

I love my ugly race.

THE MINUTE MY wife and I first walked in to the Heart of Oak, years ago and quite by chance, I realized that for the first time in my life I had found my own crowd. I had walked into a place where I fitted right in, right from the start. But I was half way down my first pint before I recognized who we were. To begin with, I just recognized the scene in a painting: the red coats on one side, the kilts and plaids on the other, the cannon-smoke and rain, the long low mossy wall, the man on a white horse, wheeling: there's only one battle these could depict.

"That's a painting of Culloden," I said to my wife. She turned and looked over her shoulder. "And that one beside it, with the men by the boat on the shore, is of Bonnie Prince Charlie. Mind you, I can't tell whether he's landing or leaving."

She laughed. "Yes—they're looking very decisively in both directions!"

The music started up then, and we listened to it and looked around. The Heart of Oak then looked just the same as it does tonight. The room is almost square. The wall beside the door faces the bar. Along that wall there's a table, and behind it sit the musicians and singers. Others

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sit behind the table at right angles to it, beneath the painting of Culloden. The musicians and singers look like their audience, and now and again someone you thought was just there to listen will step forward and slide behind the table and start strumming or singing.

There are one or two beautiful women in the room, and here and there a handsome man, if you like the gypsy rover type—such as Andy, the guy who was playing a guitar and singing that first night we walked in. Not tall; short curled-back hair that was black then, eyebrows that met in the middle and a dark two-millimeter stubble. The rest of us . . . we're ordinary, but with some aspect in common that's hard to define, and only noticeable when we're all in one place. It was when I was idly scanning the other faces and wondering why some of them looked vaguely familiar and why most of them seemed, not related exactly, but from the same stock, that I realized.

These were my people.

We were the defeated.

Defeat. That's what folk songs—British folk songs, at any rate—are about. They're about vanished trades and lost loves and lost causes. They're not like the blues, or country and western. They don't protest; they don't even, always, mourn. They remember what was lost, and they admit defeat.

That admission is what makes the defeated cheerful. They're not losers, not failures, not depressed. I once met a man who'd had a very successful life—in diplomacy, spe-

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cial ops, politics, literature. His family still fancied themselves Jacobites. He had the look and the attitude I see on most of the faces here. If you're a Jacobite, you *know* you're defeated. My mother once told me, quite seriously, that the tinkers—Scotland's traveling people, a native equivalent of Gypsies—were descendants of Charles Edward Stuart's scattered soldiers. I refrained from reminding her that we were, too: we had an ancestor who fell at Culloden, and another who carried the clan colors home, wrapped beneath his plaid.

I'm no Jacobite, not even when sentimentally, not even when drunk. But I can still join in “Mo Ghille Mear.”

End of Excerpt