



YOUNG MUNGO

A Novel

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Also by Douglas Stuart

Shuggie Bain

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For Alexander,
and all the gentle sons of Glasgow

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THE MAY AFTER

ONE

As they neared the corner, Mungo halted and shrugged the man's hand from his shoulder. It was such an assertive gesture that it took everyone by surprise. Turning back, Mungo squinted up at the tenement flat, and his eyes began to twitch with one of their nervous spasms. As his mother watched him through the ear-of-wheat pattern of the net curtains, she tried to convince herself that his twitch was a happy wink, a lovely Morse code that telegraphed everything would be okay. F. I. N. E. Her youngest son was like that. He smiled when he didn't want to. He would do anything just to make other people feel better.

Mo-Maw swept the curtain aside and leant on the window frame like a woman looking for company. She raised her tea mug in one hand and tapped the glass with her pearlescent pink nails. It was a colour she had chosen to make her fingers appear fresher, because if her hands looked younger, then so might her face, so might her entire self. As she looked down upon him, Mungo shifted again, his feet turning towards home. She fluttered her painted fingers and shooed him away. *Go!*

Her boy was stooped slightly, the rucksack a little hump on his back. Unsure of what he should take, he had packed it with half-hearted nonsense: an oversized Fair Isle jumper, teabags, his dog-eared sketchbook, a game of Ludo, and some half-used tubes of medicated ointment. Yet he wavered on the corner as though the bag might tip him backwards into the gutter. Mo-Maw knew the bag was not heavy. She knew it was the bones of him that had become a dead weight.

This was all for his own good and yet he dared stare up at her with a doleful look. It was too hot for his nonsense. He was fraying her nerves.

Go! she mouthed again and took a swally of the cold tea.

The two men idled at the bend. They shared a sigh and a glance and a chuckle, before putting down their bags and lighting cigarettes. Mo-Maw could tell they were itchy to be gone – these narrow streets didn't like unknown faces – and she could see it took patience not to goad her boy on. The men were canny enough not to pressure Mungo, not so close to home, not when he could still bolt. Their slitted eyes kept flicking towards him, watching, waiting to see what the boy would do next, while their hands ferreted inside their trouser pockets as they peeled their ball sacks from their thighs. The day would be muggy and close. The younger man fiddled with himself. Mo-Maw licked the back of her bottom teeth.

Mungo raised his hand to wave up at the window but Mo-Maw glowered down at him. He must have seen her face harden, or perhaps he thought waving was childish, because he aborted the gesture and grasped a fistful of air, which made him seem like a drowning man.

In his baggy shorts and his oversized cagoule, he looked like a waif dressed in hand-me-downs. But as he pushed the cloud of curls away from his face, Mo-Maw saw his jaw tighten, and she was reminded of the determined young man that he was becoming. She tapped the glass again. *Don't you scowl at me.*

The younger of the two men stepped forward and laid his arm across Mungo's shoulders. Mungo winced at the weight. Mo-Maw saw him rub at his sides, and she was reminded of the tender purple bruises that were blooming across his ribs. She tapped the glass, *Oh fur God's sake, jist go!* At this, her son lowered his gaze and let himself be led away. The men were laughing as they clapped her boy on the back. *Guid lad. Brave lad.*

Mo-Maw was not a religious woman but she stretched her pink fingernails to the heavens and wiggled them as she cried hallelujah. She tipped her tea into the parched spider plant, and filling her mug with fortified wine, she turned up the music and kicked off her shoes.

The three travellers caught a corporation bus into Sauchiehall Street. Glasgow was in a rare swelter and they had to push upstream through rowdy gangs of shirtless men already poached pink from the sun. City

benches were lined with thick-armed grannies, proper in their hats and good wool coats, and sweating heavily across their top lips. As sticky-faced weans skipped across the street the women pulled their heads into their fleshy chests and dozed in the heat. They reminded Mungo of the tenement pigeons, big lazy doos with their eyes half-closed and their heads swallowed by neck feathers.

The city was alive with the sound of buskers competing with the battle rattle of a practising Orange band. Like chirruping songbirds, the Orangemen's piccolos made a sweet trilling sound against the heavy thump of a Lambeg drum. The tune was so affecting that an older, refined-looking gentleman was lost in reverie and weeping big dewdrop tears. Mungo tried not to stare at the sight of a man crying so openly. He couldn't be sure whether the man wept in anguish or with pride. There was the glint of an expensive watch band peeking from out of his suit sleeve, and Mungo decided, based on no other information, that it was too ostentatious, too indiscreet to belong to a Catholic.

The men lumbered in the sunshine. They were weighed down with armfuls of thin plastic bags, a satchel filled with fishing tackle, and a camping rucksack. Mungo could hear them complain of their thirst. He had known them only an hour, but they had mentioned it several times already. They seemed always to be thirsty. "Ah'm gasping for a guid drink," said the elder of the two. He was already beetroot-red and overheating in his thick tweed suit. The other man ignored him. He was walking bandy-legged, as though his tight denims were chafing his thighs.

They led the boy into the bus station and with a rattle of coins they boarded a coach that would take them out the north side of Glasgow and towards the green hills of Dumbarton.

By the time they fought their way to the plastic bench at the back of the bus the men were sweating and hard for breath. Mungo sat between them and made himself as small as possible. When one of them looked out the window he studied the side of their face. If they turned his way, he would feign interest out the opposite window and try to avoid their eyes.

Mungo braced his chin on to his chest and tried to stop the nervous itching that was spreading across his face as he watched the grey city go by.

He knew he was doing that thing again, the crinkled nose, the blinking, the face that looked like he might sneeze, but never would. He could feel the older man's gaze upon him.

“Ah cannae ’member the last time ah came oot of the city.” The man's voice had a raspy quality, like he had a throatful of dry toast. He would occasionally inhale in the middle of a sentence, wavering, like each word might be the last one he managed. Mungo tried to smile up at him, but there was something ferrety about the man that made it hard to look him in the eyes.

The suited stranger turned back to his window and Mungo took this opportunity to study the length of him. He was an angular man in his late fifties or early sixties, but the years had clearly been hard. Mungo had seen his kind before. The young Protestant hooligans off the scheme often hounded men like him for fun, rounding up the jangling drunks outside the working men's club, taunting them towards the chip shop and then swooping as the last of their coins fell from their burst pockets. Neglectful eating and hard drinking had withered and jaundiced him. There was too much skin over too little fat, his yellow face wrinkling like an overripe apple.

The man's tatty jacket was mismatched with a pair of dress trousers, the knees of which sagged like more stretched-out skin. Underneath his jacket he wore a T-shirt emblazoned with an advertisement for a plumber on the South Side, the neck was torn and separating from the body. Mungo wondered if perhaps these were the only clothes he owned; they smelled musty, as though he wore them through smirr and shine.

Mungo felt strangely sorry for him. The man was trembling slightly. Years spent hiding from daylight in dark pubs had given him the nervous reactions of a whippet pushed out into the snow, and he had the small darting eyes and long twitching limbs of a mistreated dog. He seemed on the verge of bolting.

As the last of the high-rises faded from view, the suited man made some small sounds, filling the empty air, inviting the others to join him in conversation. Mungo braced his chin to his chest and said nothing. The

younger man was scratching his crotch. Mungo watched him from the corner of his eye.

This man seemed to be in his early twenties. He wore indigo denims and his belt was laced under the logo so as not to obscure the proud Armani badge. He was handsome – or he must have been close to it once – but there was something already spoiled about him, like good butcher’s meat that had been left out. Despite the heat he had been wearing a puffy bomber jacket. When he removed it, Mungo could see his arms were roped with lean muscle that spoke to a heavy trade, or years of fighting, or both.

His hair was clipped short. His fringe had been combed forward in a gelled line, the hairs formed little saw-toothed points, as though they had been cut by pinkie shears. Mungo stared at the damaged skin of his knuckles. He was honey-coloured in the way Scottish people seldom were; perhaps his family were chip-shop Italian or Spanish by way of the Black Irish.

Any trace of that romance was lost as he said in flat, glottal Glaswegian, “Haw. Dinnae be botherin’ wi’ auld St Christopher.” He spoke without looking directly at either of them. “He’d bore the arse aff a horse.”

Mungo was left to ponder why he was on a bus with St Christopher, while the other man went back to picking his nose. As the man’s pinkie searched the inside of his nostril Mungo noted how he wore sovvie rings on all of his fingers and that his forearms were snaked with interlocking tattoos. He was a man covered in words: from the logos on his chest, to his shoes, to his jeans, to his skin. He had written on his flesh with a sewing needle, women’s names, gang names: Sandra, Jackie, RFC, The Mad Squad. Here and there, the blue biro ink had bled, it wept beneath his skin like a watercolour and tinted him a pretty violet hue. Mungo read his arms carefully. He committed as much as he could to memory.

St Christopher reached into one of the shopping bags, and with a sly wink he raised a half-dozen cans of Tennent’s Super. Keeping his small eyes on the back of the bus driver’s head, he broke two cans free of their noose and offered them to the boy and the tattooed man. Mungo shook his head but the young man took a can with a grateful groan. He burst it open

and clamped his lips over the escaping foam. He drained it in three throatfuls.

St Christopher must have read the boy's mind because he said, "They calls us St Christopher on account ah go to the alcoholic meetings on Hope Street every Sunday and Thursday. Ah'm Sunday-Thursday Christopher, so as no to be confused wi' Castlemilk Chris or Wee Ginger-Heided Chrissy." The man took a slug, and Mungo watched his throat struggle to take enough in. "S-T Christopher, ye see?"

Mungo had heard something like that before. Mo-Maw herself was known as Monday-Thursday Maureen. That's who the other alcoholics asked for when the boy answered the hallway telephone. The callers wanted to be sure they hadn't found the house of "Maureen from Millerston" or "Wee-Mo frae the Milk" by mistake. These small distinctions mattered if they were to honour the code of anonymity.

"Sometimes ah have the shakes that bad, ah should go tae a Wednesday night meeting as well. But well, ah just cannae." St Christopher made a sad frown. "Do you see what ah mean?"

Mungo had been working hard at seeing what people really meant. Mo-Maw and his sister, Jodie, were always nagging him about that. Apparently there could be some distance between what a person was saying and what you should be seeing. Jodie said he was gullible. Mo-Maw said she wished she had raised him to be cannier, less of anybody's fool. It was a funny thing to be a disappointment because you were honest and assumed others might be too. The games people played made his head hurt.

St Christopher was sucking down his can when Mungo said, "Maybe you should just go on Wednesdays too. Like, if you really need to?"

"Aye, but ah like ma handle." His hand reached inside his shirt and drew out a small tin medallion of the saint. He peered down his pockmarked nose at it. "*S-T Christopher*. It's the nicest thing anybody's ever said about us."

"Could you not just give them your family name?"

"Widnae be very anonymous wid it?" interrupted the tattooed man. "If ye start spilling yer guts and letting everybody know yer demons, then they'd be able to lift yer name out in the street."

Mungo knew fine well that people had demons. Mo-Maw's showed itself whenever she jangled for a drink. Her demon was a flat, eel-like snake with the jaw and beady eyes of a weasel and the matted coat of a mangy rat. It was a sleek thing on a chain leash that shook her and dragged her towards things that she ought to be walking away from. It was greedy and it was cunning. It could lie dormant, wait for the children to leave for school, to kiss their mother goodbye, and then it would turn on Mo-Maw, throttle her as though she was some shivering mouse. At other times it coiled up inside her and sat heavy on her heart. The demon was always there just under the surface, even on good days.

On the days that she gave in to the drink, the demon could be quieted for a while. But sometimes Mo-Maw could get so far in the drink that she would become another woman entirely, another creature altogether. The first sign was how her skin grew slack, like her real face was sliding off to reveal this strange woman who lurked underneath. Mungo and his brother and sister called this slack version of her *Tattie-bogle*, like some heartless, shambling scarecrow. No matter how her children stuffed her with their love or tried to prop her up and gather her back together, she took in all their care and attention and felt as hollow as ever.

When Tattie-bogle spoke, her lower jaw would hang loose and her tongue would roll in her mouth in a dirty, lascivious way, like she wanted very badly to lick something. Tattie-bogle always suspected that she was missing some party, that something more exciting must be happening just around the corner or hidden up the next close. When she felt like this she would turn to her children and shoo them away as though they were drab little birds. Tattie-bogle believed that better things, brighter lights, bigger laughs were always happening to women who had no children.

Tattie-bogle would become best friends with women she had just met, and over a half-bottle of Black & White whisky she would betray her own intimate secrets, and then felt wounded when these new friends didn't share the same depth of feeling. Then when they fought, she dragged them, or she was dragged by them, across the carpet and down the stairs. In the morning Mungo would find tufts of perfumed hair, like the straw from a burst scarecrow, lying in the hallway, animated by the draught that whistled under

the front door. Either he or Jodie would Hoover it up with the Ewbank and say nothing more about it.

It was Jodie who had split their mother in two. In the cold morning light, this trick helped Mungo forgive Mo-Maw when the drink had made her vindictive and rotten. "It wasn't Mo-Maw," soothed Jodie, as she held him in the airing cupboard, "it was only horrible old Tattie-bogle, and she's sleeping now."

Mungo knew what demons looked like. As the bus trundled north, he sat quietly and thought about his own.

"Ah wish this driver would hurry the fuck up," the tattooed man said. He reached into the bag between his legs, the canvas strap was studded with brightly coloured lures. Rummaging amongst the spools of fishing gut he produced a pouch of tobacco. He rolled a fat cigarette, his tongue darting along the paper. The man took a deep drag and blew the smoke into his empty lager can. He cupped his hand over the mouth like he had caught a spider, but the stench of tobacco was already wafting around the bus. Several of the passengers turned and glared towards the back seats. Mungo leaned over him with a meek smile and unclipped the hasp on the thin window.

"Do you smoke?" the man asked between greedy puffs. His eyes were a rich green, glinting here and there with flecks of gold.

"No."

"Guid." He took another lungful. "It's bad for ye."

St Christopher reached out a trembling hand and the tattooed man reluctantly let go of the cigarette. St Christopher inhaled and filled himself up to the very brim. His dry lips were sticky on the damp paper. The tattooed man rammed his shoulder into Mungo's. "Ma pals call us Gallowgate on account of where I'm frae." He adjusted his sovvie rings and nodded towards the oblivious bus driver. "You're a nervous wee fella, int ye? Don't worry. If he gies us any lip, ah'll fuckin' stab him."

St Christopher sucked on the dout until it burned his fingers. "Do ye like tae fish?"

"I don't know." Mungo was glad to see the cigarette die. "I've never done it before."

“Where we’re gaun ye should catch pike, eels, speckled trout,” Gallowgate said. “You can fish the whole weekend and naebody will come by and ask for a permit. Ye’ll be twenty, forty miles from the nearest soul.”

St Christopher nodded in agreement. “Aye. It is as near tae heaven as ye can get on three buses.”

“Four,” corrected Gallowgate, “four buses.”

The remoteness of it filled Mungo with a sinking feeling. “Do you eat the fish?”

“Depends on the size,” said Gallowgate. “In breeding season you can catch that many that you’d need a deep freezer to keep them all. Does your mammy have a big freezer?”

Mungo shook his head. He thought of Mo-Maw’s tiny box freezer, how it was thick with ice. He wondered if she would be happy with a fat speckled trout, but he doubted it. Nothing he did seemed to make her happy. He had been worrying her heart lately, which he knew because she had told him so. He had tried not to laugh when she had said it, but all he could picture was her heart walking around the living room in her chest and folding a white hanky in agitation. At the time Jodie had rolled her eyes and said, “Listen to yourself, Maureen. Do you even have a heart?”

Mungo picked his cheekbone as the bus passed Dumbarton and the ochre banks of Loch Lomond came into view. He remembered the heavy things Mo-Maw had said. He knew why he was here; it was his own fault.

“How auld are you anyhow?” asked Gallowgate.

“Fifteen.” Mungo tried to draw himself up to his full height, but his ribs still hurt and the old bus had terrible suspension. He was average height for his age, one of the last in his class to take a growth spurt. His older brother Hamish liked to grip his chin and tilt his face to the light. He would inspect the fine line of dander growing on Mungo’s top lip in the same way a gardener checks on a spindly seedling. He would blow on it just to irritate Mungo. Although Mungo wasn’t especially tall, he was still taller than Hamish. Hamish hated that.

St Christopher reached out and circled the boy’s wrist with his long fingers. “Ye’re only a wee thing aren’t ye? Ah would have put ye at twelve, thirteen, tops.”

“Ach he’s nearly a man.” Gallowgate slung an inked arm over the boy’s shoulders. He exchanged a sly look with his friend. “Have yer balls dropped yet, Mungo?”

Mungo didn’t answer. They just sort of hung there all wrinkly and pointless. If they dropped, where would they drop to?

“Ye know, yer nut sack?” Gallowgate punched the boy lightly in the groin.

“I don’t know.” Mungo doubled over for protection.

The men were chuckling to themselves and Mungo tried to join in, but it was a self-conscious laugh, a half-beat too late. St Christopher broke into a hacking cough and Gallowgate turned back to the window in disdain. He said, “We’ll look after ye, Mungo. Nae worries. We’ll have some laughs, and you can bring yer mammy some fresh fish.”

Mungo massaged his sore balls. He thought again about Mo-Maw’s worried heart.

“Aye. Yer mammy is a good wummin. One of the few left.” Gallowgate started biting the dry skin from around his index finger and spitting it on the floor. Suddenly he stopped what he was doing. “Can I see?” Before Mungo could protest, he hooked his hand at the bottom of Mungo’s cagoule. He started to lift it and began undressing the boy. “Gie us a wee look then.”

Mungo raised his arms and let the man draw his top up until the nylon cagoule covered his face and bathed everything in a calm blue light. Mungo couldn’t see, but he could hear the men and the ragged patterns of their breathing. There was a sad intake of air, a pause, then a sigh. Gallowgate’s fingertip was slimy where he had been chewing it. He pressed it against the blackening bruise on Mungo’s chest, and Mungo felt it travel from his sternum, around the curve of his bottom rib, as though the man was tracing a map. Gallowgate prodded his ribs and then, as if testing their tenderness, he dug his finger into the bruise. Mungo winced and squirmed to get away. He pulled his clothes back down, certain his face was scalding. Gallowgate shook his head. “Terrible business that. Yer mammy telt us all about that mess ye got yourself into with those dirty Fenian bastards. Catholics, man. Butter widnae melt.”

Mungo had been trying not to think about it.

“Dinnae worry,” grinned Gallowgate. “We’ll get you away frae that scheme. We’ll have a proper boy’s weekend. Make a man out of you yet, eh?”

They changed bus, and then they changed bus again, and then they waited nearly three hours for the next one. They were far beyond Loch Lomond now and Mungo began to think the men had no real idea where they were. It all looked the same to him.

The two soaks lay in the gorse behind the metal bus shelter and finished the last of the Tennent’s cans. Every now and then Gallowgate would throw an empty over the hedge on to the country road and ask the boy if a bus was coming. Mungo tidied up the rubbish and said no, “No bus.”

Mungo shivered in the sunlight and let his face tic freely, free from the open-mouthed stares of strangers. When he was alone, he tried to tire out the urge like this, but it never worked.

It was colder out here in the countryside. The slow northern sun seemed stuck in the sky, but the heat it gave was stolen by the long wind that hurried through the glens. His nose began to drip. He might also be sunburnt in the morning.

He sank on to his haunches. There was a scab on his right kneecap, the skin was puckering and itchy. Mungo checked no one was watching. Then he put his lips to it, ran his tongue over it to soften it, and sucked it till his mouth filled with a metallic taste. Mungo knew he couldn’t be trusted not to lick his scab again so he covered his bare legs with his anorak and, pulling his knees to his chest, he hid them from the warmth-less sun. It had been such a rare sort of heat on the scheme that he hadn’t thought to bring more than his thin football shorts. Mo-Maw had given him no time to get his bag ready, and she hadn’t stopped him as he sloped, poorly dressed, out the door.

He pulled the thick Fair Isle jumper from his bag and slipped it on under his cagoule. The dry Shetland wool tickled as it came down over his face. Mungo checked the soaks were still lying in the gorse. Cupping the jumper up and over his nose, he ran his tongue along the inside of the knit. It still smelled of fresh air, sawdust, and the sour ammonia of the pissy doocot. It

reminded him of home. Using his thumb, he stuffed the fabric into his open mouth and closed his eyes. He shoved it in until he gagged.

By the time the country bus arrived the men were deep in their drink. Mungo helped them aboard with their bags and fishing rods and then he waited patiently for St Christopher to pay the fare. The drunk man swayed and produced a handful of silver and copper shrapnel. Chapped-faced women huffed impatiently, their shopping defrosting at their feet, and Mungo felt his neck burn as he scraped the change from St Christopher's curled palm and dropped coin after coin into the tray. The boy could feel his eyes twitch, and he was relieved when the driver finally said, "Okay, okay, stop. That's plenty, son." He had been embarrassed that he couldn't add so fast. School had been scarce for him since Mo-Maw had taken sick on drink again.

The driver released the handbrake. Mungo couldn't meet the eyes of the country women but he laughed as he heard St Christopher lollop after him and wish their sour faces a "glorious and happy afternoon." Gallowgate was already sound asleep on the pile of tackle and plastic bags. Mungo sat on the seat in front and picked at the black rubber sealant around the window.

The fat bus bumped along the serpentine road. It stopped every so often, and dropped little white women outside their little white houses. The diesel engine thrummed a lullaby and the boy could feel his eyes grow heavy from the day. A copse of pine and yew trees began to encroach on the road, their leaves mottled the sunlight on his face. Mungo laid his head against the glass. He fell into a fitful sleep.

Hamish was there. His brother was lying in the single bed opposite his own. By how the daylight reflected off his thick glasses, Mungo could tell it was early evening. Hamish was scooping spoonfuls of cereal into his mouth as trails of chocolatey milk streamed down his hairless chest. Mungo lay still, quietly watching his brother. He always enjoyed moments like this, when the person didn't know they were being observed. Hamish was smiling to himself. The left side of his face puckered in a dirty grin as he flicked through the pages of a magazine. Mungo could see the pained, painted faces of naked women, spread-eagled and grimacing back up at Hamish. Yet when Mungo brought his gaze back to his brother's face, it