

Arden, near Glasgow

In July 1957 I was newly ten years old. It was my second summer in Arden, one of a rash of newer slum-clearance housing schemes then under construction around Glasgow. Arden is located to the south and west of the city centre. It was shoehorned between the older established housing schemes of Carnwadric, Priesthill, Nitshill and Pollok.

Arden still exists, still recognisable as the place I remember, although the particular tenement close in Kilvaxter Drive where I lived in has been demolished, replaced with a different style of accommodation.

Between us in Arden and those older developments mentioned, lay the area where the Darnley housing scheme would be built many years later. However, back in 1957 this area was a network of fields in mixed agricultural use, with a small dairy herd rotated on rough grazing over several fields and other fields growing barley. We called these 'the farmer's fields' and treated them as our playground. Our families were mostly 'townies' with no recent connection with farming or living in the countryside. These fields seemed vast to us, and full of secrets.

In 1957 Arden comprised simply of houses. We had no new schools, churches, shops or amenities of any kind. We had to make our own fun. For boys an important activity which consumed many hours was street football, (there were few parked cars and almost no traffic, apart from bicycles). We played many other street games and, in better weather, spent hours roaming over the farmer's fields in search of entertainment. I confess we were destructive, very destructive. As were our parents; they removed sods of turf to make rough lawns in front of our closes and to create grassy areas in the backcourts that the builders had left strewn with rubble. The farmer must have hated us.

Our families were the first occupants of these new homes. Everyone was new to each other, all working class, most scrabbling to make ends meet. Almost all of us had come from slum-clearance homes, and were thus by definition 'poor'. As children we did not understand that our parents were also at sea, stunned by the newness, feeling their way into a new culture, most households loaded with hire purchase debt, incurred to buy new beds and furniture to fill these larger homes. There were few connections between families and no established pecking order.

We children were part of the post-War 'bulge'. At school we were squeezed into crowded classrooms of up to fifty children, seated in pairs, ranged in rows of the kind that can be seen at the Scotland Street School Museum¹. Each week we endured a class test and the brightest of us inhabited the back row furthest from the teacher, under trust to behave. The less able and troublemakers were seated along the front row under the teacher's vigilant eyes. I was usually in or near the back row. My best friend Alasdair (Alda) was usually seated

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near me, often in the row just in front. A lot of our learning was by rote which we found boring. Like others, Alda and I passed scraps of paper to each other, trivial messages, planning what to do at play-times or after school, or writing rude words, trying to make each other laugh. For a period of about 6 years Alda and I were inseparable, like Siamese twins.

Our tenement close housed eight families with twenty-two children under the age of fifteen. Other closes nearby were similar. This meant there were hundreds of us school-age children. Gradually we got to know whom to trust and whom to fear. We operated in two distinct groups: the secondary school children, who seemed remote, grown-up; and us, those still at primary school. All were often expected to care for our younger siblings, some of whom were mere toddlers. With three younger brothers this was a duty I resented then, and which still irks even now, all these many years later.

Occasionally an older child would deign to play with us. It was almost always a she and her pretext for lording it over us would be that she had been told to look after a younger sister or brother, a child who was one of us. We hated being bossed around and told what to do. We knew if we disobeyed this hated older child, she would 'clype' on us, tell our mothers that we had done something we had been warned not to do, gone somewhere we were not supposed to go. When such a girl decided to impose herself upon us, we frequently ran away, ruthlessly abandoning the child whose sister or brother wanted to dominate us. We had our secrets which we kept strictly to ourselves. That was our culture. To clype on each other was to risk being excluded.

Set free to play, our loosely knit gaggle whose numbers ranged from two or three up to as many as ten, sometimes including a girl or two, depending on what we planned to do. There was no established leadership and our mix changed from day to day. We were neither tough nor brave. Children from Priesthill and Pollok seemed strange and frightening. If we met any, even if they were our age or younger, we would at once sneak quietly away to scamper back over the farmer's fields to the safety of our own streets and back-greens.

At weekends and during school holidays we mostly used shank's pony. Or, if we could scrounge a few pennies, took the tram to Pollokshaws or Shawlands, places we knew because this is where we travelled to attend school. On occasions, during summer holidays, we might walk there. With many distractions on the way, a trip to the Pollok Estate or to the swimming baths in Pollokshaws and back again on foot might take all day.

Ronnie Heaney

Ronnie Heaney, known as Ronnie, was a tomboy. Although small and wiry, Ronnie could play football quite well and was often a second or third pick when we selected teams for our small-sided games. To us she seemed fearless and because of this she could be frightening. For example, given an initial leg up into the bottom branches of the huge tree beside the Shady Brook, she could climb into the highest reaches amidst the thin, swaying branches, laughing down as we called up, marvelling at her daring. She could swim like a fish and dive underwater to pick up things from the bottom of the swimming pool. Amazingly to us, she could even do a proper swallow dive from the top step of the diving dale. Her favourite ploy was to 'bomb' people, children and adults alike, leaping down feet first, causing the pool attendant to blow his whistle fiercely at her. Adults did not intimidate her, and she laughed off such scoldings, escaping ejection by swimming underwater to pop up her head amid a group of other less brave children huddled near the shallow end.

Ronnie was the youngest of a family of four girls. I think her two eldest sisters worked in a textile factory in Pollokshaws. The other girl, Lorna, was at Shawlands Academy, hoping to become a nurse. Ronnie had short red hair with an odd quiff at the front. She was small for her 8 years, always wore shorts and could easily be mistaken for a boy. She seldom joined in our conversation/debates/arguments. When she did, she would never give in to anyone, mainly because she was always right. She was two years below me at Sir John Maxwell School in Pollokshaws. As I remember it, she was always top of her class.

Ronnie's father, Alec Heaney worked abroad, or so she told us. We knew better and so never asked awkward questions. The rumour, whispered by our parents, was that Alec Heaney was in prison for killing someone in a gang fight. Kitty Heaney, Ronnie's mother did not work. Like Ronnie, she was secretive, spending most days away from Arden. Some said she caught the tram back to the Gorbals, where she was from. Others said she was 'out on business' which was a phrase which misled us children, as was intended.

When I was 10 years old our mothers all looked the same. Thinking back, I suppose Mrs Heaney was good-looking but my memory is vague. I do remember she was always dressed in a flashy way, wearing rings, jewellery and make-up. She had a shiny handbag and carried a fancy umbrella on rainy days. She never wore a scarf or a hat, and her hair was always nice; and golden red, like Ronnie's. Kitty Heaney shocked everyone by going out dancing most weekends, all dolled up. She had been seen at the Plaza Ballroom and other dance halls. For a married woman to do so without her husband was considered scandalous. Regularly, and late at night, she was dropped off at our close by cars that were 'definitely not taxis'. This gave rise to another rumour, one that we heard our parents whisper but this secret we could not decipher.

Many neighbours, watching her pay her tram fares, claimed that Kitty Heaney always had 'easy' money in her purse, an adjective never explained. Ronnie always had money too. Once I

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saw her pay entry to the swimming baths with a half-a-crown coin. She put her change into a small orange purse-bag which she carefully zipped closed before returning it to her pocket and pushing her hankie on top. This purse was also tied by a string to her trouser belt.

Although she often tagged along with us, she was not really one of us. If we agreed to a plan that Ronnie did not like, she simply went off on her own, responding to our calls of "Ronnie, where are you going?" with a shrug of her shoulders. One time, when Ronnie and I were alone, just the two of us chatting, she told me that she often went to her Granny's place, in the Gorbals. We already knew, from overheard adult conversations, that the Gorbals was a violent place, full of gangs who slashed each other, which Ronnie readily confirmed. She said that sometimes she went to libraries to read books, newspapers and women's magazines. She claimed she often went to see films on her own, sneaking in by pretending she was returning from the toilet. It was easier at city centre cinemas, she said, where no one knew her. Her favourite film was *Safari* because it starred Victor Mature, her favourite actor. She claimed she had seen it six times without ever paying. At the time I secretly doubted her, thinking she was making it up to boost her reputation as a bold and daring person.

The Shady Brookⁱ

This burn ran alongside a towering railway embankment where a regular passage of engines pulling trains could be 'spotted'. Some of us owned closely-typed trainspotters' guides which listed engine numbers under various categories. In the late 1950s almost all these trains, both passenger and freight, were pulled by coal-fired steam-driven engines. A diesel train was a rarity for us. Before Dr Beeching wielded his axe, the range of engines was wide, from simple six wheeled local trains to larger, more elegant, more powerful engines pulling long-distance trains, probably to London, we told ourselves. The smaller ones we called 'tankers' or 'puggies': these were very familiar to us, our old friends, with many ticks against their numbers.

Certain trains seemed to rush past at enormously high speed. These were the ones we wanted, trains pulled by engines with windshields ('shielders'). Some shielders also had name badges ('namers'). A shielder that was also a namer was at the top of our hierarchy, the focus of our rivalry. To clearly spot both the number and the name, honour required that we scamper up the steep embankment and stand recklessly close to the side of the track. Often this would result in the driver blasting a shrill warning with his steam whistle. This sound filled us with dread: if the driver reported what had happened, that we had trespassed on railway property, perhaps the railway police might come and arrest us. On such occasions we would immediately race for home, already preparing our joint and several alibis, should the police try to hunt us down.

Once in a while we would see 'doubblers', two engines close-coupled in series, usually pulling a long line of heavy freight carriages. After an initial flurry of anticipation we might be disappointed to discover that these engines were only two tankers. Once on one occasion did we see a doubler formed of two shielders that were also namers. Sadly, it raced past before we could identify the engines.

I remember someone shouting as it disappeared:

"It must have been a train taking the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh to Buckingham Palace".

Over time, this assertion entered the myth of our collective memory as a fact.

None of us had a watch and our notion of actual time was vague. We knew a shielder usually passed our favoured fishing spot a few minutes after nine each morning. Once free of home and the risk of being sent on errands or lumbered with younger siblings, we usually raced the mile from our close to stand beside the track to try to spot its name and number.

If we saw it pass while we were too far away, we slowed down to check the hedges for birds' nests. Some of us collected birds' eggs and in great ignorance we must have destroyed hundreds of unborn chicks. Mostly we found Blackbird, Song Thrush and Chaffinch nests,

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occasionally a Hedge Sparrow's. One occasion while running through a field I almost stood on a nesting Skylark. In panic the bird rose in front of us and we skidded to a halt. On our hands and knees we found the nest, a bare scrape in the ground behind a tuft of grass. After a short debate we decided to remove all three eggs on the pretext that 'she', (the mother) 'will definitely lay more'. Using a thorn from a nearby hedge we tried to 'blow' out the yolks. What emerged were little red-blooded blobs, the remains of corpses not revealed until we eventually cracked the shells. This was not uncommon. To avoid this waste of effort, and if water could be sourced nearby - even a puddle would suffice - we would 'test' the egg. According to the 'test', if the egg floated, it was 'new' and we could safely blow it. If it sank it was 'nearly hatched' and we would reluctantly return it to the nest, unaware that we had probably killed the chick by chilling it during the float test.

In reality our train-spotting and bird nesting were always secondary activities. Most of our time at the Shady Brook was spent fishing for 'baggy minnows', our generic term for catfish (stone loach), red-breasted sticklebacks and pinheads, tiny thin fish which swam in small erratic shoals, almost impossible to catch. A big catfish might be 3" long and was much admired. Very occasionally we would see a larger fish shooting through quickly. These were probably small brown trout, perhaps 6" to 9" long, and generally created a panic as we believed they might bite us. Such monsters were always reported as 'gigantic'.

Our fishing method required, ideally, at least two jam jars, one to fish with, the other to store any fish caught. In the beginning we had proudly taken our prizes home, only to be sent to return them, so they would be there for the next time. Our method was simple. With practice we became effective. Using an open-ended jar held in one hand while using the other hand to guide the target fish into the jar then seal it inside. This process often resulted in a loud shout of '*missed it*' accompanied by a curse of frustration, or a '*got it*' with a shouted description of our latest prize and a confirmation of the running total in our keeper jar. Catching a larger fish, usually a catfish, meant if it struggled, causing our hands to be tickled, we feared being nipped.

Looking back I find it hard to admit how fearful and timid we were in most things we did at that time, especially when we moved out of our immediate environs. Amongst ourselves, close to our homes, in our own backyard so to speak, we were normal, confident, and secure. In the famer's fields or at the Shady Brook we were exposed, jittery. Perhaps this excitement was part of the lure for all of us, including Ronnie?

A Perfect Day.

One July day in 1957 we escaped from our close into the bright sunshine of a perfect summer morning. The sun was high. It was already hot. Ahead of us stretched the remaining weeks of our school holidays. Our spirits were up and we were chattering nonsense to each other.

Some lucky families from our close were away on holiday. We were reduced to only five: Alda who like me was also newly 10, Eric (8), Ronnie (8) and me. Trailing behind us was Wee Tommy (7), wearing new red leather sandals with canary yellow socks and dragging a new size 5 football in a string bag. This prized possession was a holiday present from his doting grandparents, a smartly dressed couple who owned a car and had a shoe shop in Shawlands. Everyone knew that Tommy was adopted because his mother had died when he was born, and that the woman Tommy called "Mummy" was actually his auntie. The only person in Arden who did not know this was Wee Tommy himself.

We had already decided to head across the farmer's fields for the Shady Brook. We knew Ronnie was not all that keen but she tagged along anyway. Perhaps if she had not come with us that day, our lives might have been different.

As well as our jam jars, between us we toted three ancient hickory golf clubs. I was the proud owner of a mashie which my father had bought for me at a mysterious place called *The Barras*.ⁱⁱⁱ He cut it down to size and used yellow handlebar tape to create a grip. I was very proud of it. Between us we had six old golf balls, 'finders' from the hedges which formed the boundary of the nearby Deaconsbank Golf Club.

Alda said, "Let's go for the early shielder. C'mon, race yoos, wahlah- wahlah- wooskey!" And he was off, running at top speed, whirling his golf club above his head.

At the edge of the first field we bounced on the fence wires in frustration and watched the shielder fly along the embankment at high speed. It was heading to Kilmarnock, we had been told. This field was of rough grass, full of humps and bumps, high tufts of spiny grass and a smattering of new and old country pancakes. Thinking on this as I write, I realise that the farmer had probably more or less abandoned it, using it as a buffer against the invading hordes of children from our scheme. It was in this field, near the fence, that we had hacked energetically if unscientifically with our golf clubs to dig and scrape assorted golf holes. Some were roughly six inches in diameter, others larger, a few smaller; most were hard to spot.

'It was a shielder,' shouted Eric.

'And it was a namer as well,' I said.

'Probably the "Falkland Islands" again!' said Alda.

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'No, did you not see its layout, 4-6-2? It a City class, probably "The City of Glasgow"', said Ronnie.

'How do you know that, Ronnie?' asked Wee Tommy.

'Because it's the only City class engine we've ever seen, isn't it? And it comes through nearly every day, doesn't it?'

'Let's play golf,' said Eric.

'You play if you want,' said Ronnie. 'Tommy, come on son, let's play penalties, six each. I'll go in goal first.'

Perhaps an hour later all six golf balls had been lost. Ronnie and Tommy joined in, helping us look for them.

'Let's go to the Shady Brook,' said Alda.

'I don't have any jars,' said Ronnie.

'I've got three, we can share my big keeper jar,' I said.

Our favourite spot beside the embankment was free. I took off my old blue leather play sandals and grey socks and hid them under a bush beside Eric's clumpy black school shoes. Tommy was always last to get his shoes and socks off. Impatiently I stuffed them under the bush for him and stood the golf clubs upright, tight in against the big tree where they were hard to spot. Everything was well hidden, I thought. This was necessary because usually we strayed quite far upstream chasing fish we had missed.

In summer Alda always wore black sandshoes without socks. So, still shod, he splashed into the water first. Ronnie was wearing white plastic sandals, also without socks and she was next in, but further upstream, in the deeper water that always scared us because it meant wading where the gigantic fish swam to hide.

Time passed. I sensed Ronnie standing on the bank above me, watching, saying nothing. She had three fish in the keeper jar; two redbreasts hovering and a big catfish curled on the bottom. I had missed everything I had tried for.

'How did you do that?'

'It's easy, I whisper to them,' she smiled.

'What?'

'I say to them, "Come to your Auntie Ronnie, fishy, fishy, fishy" and I hold the jar still and in they come.'

'So, it's like a sort of spell, like magic?'

'Yeah, if you like.'

'Do you know Ronnie, in the olden days they could drown you as a witch?'

'Ah, but they'd have to catch me first, Kenny McKinlay.'

'Is it time for the eleven o'clock shielder, do you think?'

'Tell you what, Kenny, give me a shoulder-uppy into the big tree and I'll be the lookout.'

Time passed.

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The other three boys carried on fishing, gradually moving further upstream, skirting beyond the deep pool, moving out of sight. We knew how far away they were from their shouts of glee or disappointment.

Ronnie shouted, 'Kenny, there's a train coming, towards Glasgow. Quick or you'll miss it. It's definitely a shielder.'

Shoeless, I ran through the long grass, scabbled over the stone dyke and up the embankment. A few minutes later I could see it hurtling along the track. I knew it must be a shielder because local trains always slowed down for the station at Kennishead, located about half a mile down the track behind me.

'It's the "Gordon Highlander", Number 46106, I got it! I got it!'

As I started to skid down the embankment on my bottom, I saw three strange boys standing on the near bank under the big tree. Thankfully my shout had been drowned out by the receding train. I kept sliding then hid behind the dyke, peeking over.

They looked tough. The tallest wore black drainpipe trousers and a white open-necked shirt with a wide collar. He had black and white baseball boots and looked about 14 or 15. His dirty blonde hair was slicked and combed like Elvis Presley's. He was smoking, cupping the cigarette inside his right hand. The next tallest looked like Drainpipes' younger brother, same hair, same baseball boots, and same strutting walk, but in short trousers. He was maybe 11 or 12. The smallest boy was about 8, about Eric's age. He had curly black hair and looked familiar. I realised he was James Wilson's wee brother. James Wilson had been a troublemaker in my primary two class at school. One day he did not come back. A week or so later we learned the Wilsons had moved to a housing scheme, among the first families from Pollokshaws to be re-housed.

The three boys had found our hiding place, probably because of Wee Tommy's socks. Drainpipes expertly flipped Wee Tommy's football up into the air and did a few keepy-uppies before lobbing it far away towards the embankment, where it disappeared into the long grass. He threw the clubs over to his companions, keeping my mashie for himself.

'Bernie, go an' get that baw. In if ye kin find it, ye kin keep it.'

'William, cumoan, son, let's fund it.'

Drainpipes looked along the bank and spotted Alda, Eric and Tommy.

'Hey yoos, kimeer. Cumoan! Rite noo! In empty oot yer poakuts. Ye huv tae pay me tae fish in this bit, it bilangs tae us.'

Wee Tommy was crying. Eric took hold of his hand and dragged him across the burn and they ran away, heading for home. Like me, Alda was frozen. He looked towards me and I ducked down, not wanting to be spotted.

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'Ur ye fuckin' deaf, china. Move it! If Ah huvtae come tae get ye, Ah'll fuckin punch yer fuckin heid in!'

It was then Drainpipes saw my keeper jar. With the mashie in his left hand he swung at the jar, shattering it. The fish landed near the water's edge gasping. Drainpipes flicked away his cigarette and bent down. He scooped our shoes with our socks inside, and flung them in the river where they slowly floated away. One of Eric's shoes caught on the edge just short of the water. Drainpipes jumped down from the bank and kicked the shoe into the water. Using the mashie awkwardly, still in his left hand, he chopped the fish, pulverizing them. As he turned to climb back up the bank, a golf ball hit him hard on the top of his head and pinged away to splash in the water

'Whit the fuck!' Drainpipes was looking at Alda. '**Yoo** ur wan fuckin deed man, china.'

From high up in the tree Ronnie shouted, 'Run Alda, run. Now! Get over to the other side, with the weans. Move, Alda, go on! Get onto the other side. He won't risk his fancy pants by wading through the water. See if you can catch up with the shoes from the other side.'

Drainpipes re-focused, staring up into the tree. He took Ronnie for a boy and screamed, 'So it wiz yoo, son? Rite yoo, Ah'm gonnae brek yur fuckin' erm fur that. Git doon here it wance, cumoan! Rite fuckin noo! D'ye heer me?'

He had changed the mashie to his right hand and was slashing it back and forth.

I shouted from behind the wall, 'Ronnie, stay up the tree. I'll run along the track to the station and get the police to come.'

Drainpipes jerked his head round in my direction. 'So, thurs anither wan ohye fuckers. Yoo ur next ye wee bastart.' Then, at the top of his voice he screamed, '**Bernie! Bernie, kimeer in git efter that ither wan!**'

Bernie was sure to catch me, I thought, because although I could run quite fast, I was barefoot. Ronnie solved my dilemma. While Drainpipes was looking at me, she launched herself off the branch, from about half way up the tree, feet first, as if she was bombing someone off the high dale. She caught Drainpipes full force in the back of his shoulders and he went down face first into the grassy bank.

They lay in a heap together. I thought they might both be dead or badly hurt. Neither of them moved for ages, unconscious or perhaps winded, I realise now. I was frozen with fear, unable to run forward, unable to run away.

Eventually Ronnie came to and crawled away then grabbed my mashie with both hands.

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Bernie and William arrived, drawn by the shouting, still wielding the other golf clubs. Bernie had Wee Tommy's football at his feet. The two boys stopped, unable to figure out what had happened to the older boy who was still down.

Bernie shouted at Ronnie, 'Ye wee fucker, ye've smasht oor Terry wi that golf club. Christ, look who it is! Wee Ronnie Heaney! Huv ye kilt 'im ? Huv ye kilt oor Terry? Cumoan, William, let's smasher tae fuck.'

Bernie stepped forward lifting the club above his head, but Ronnie struck first, ducking and whipping at his knees with a scything blow. Bernie tried to jump clear and the blow caught his left ankle. He staggered forward, fell to his knees, sobbing. Ronnie side-stepped him and raised her club to threaten William Wilson.

'Naw, Ah didnae dae anythin. Naw, honest, Ah'm no in their gang. It's jist that they live in ma close.'

'Beat it then, son,' said Ronnie.

William dropped the club and ran. Ronnie turned back to see Bernie limping away in a different direction from William, leaving both the football and the golf club behind. From a safe distance Bernie shouted, 'Ah'm gawin fur haunders, an yoor fuckin' deed whin Ah get back, Heaney.'

Ronnie shouted, 'Kenny, it's OK to come back now. I need help to carry this stuff.'

Reluctantly I started walking towards her but as I approached, Drainpipes struggled to his feet. 'Ronnie, watch out, he has a knife!'

Ronnie turned and raised the mashie like an axe, swinging it high above her head, using both hands. Drainpipes lunged forward with a slashing movement aimed at her neck. Ronnie was quicker and brought the mashie down viciously. I realised later she had probably been aiming at his skull, but luckily for Drainpipes his lunge caused her blow to land on his shoulder blade. There was a horrible snapping sound. Drainpipes screamed and went down for a second time. That wasn't enough for Ronnie. She hit him again, on the same spot. And again; and again, and. . . He passed out and it was quiet again. Only then did she stop.

From the top of the embankment Bernie shouted, 'Ah saw evurrythin'. Ah saw whit yi did tae oor Terry. Ye've fuckin kilt him, this time. See yoo Ronnie Heaney, yer fuckin' mental. Ah'm gawin fur haunders an' when Ah git back, yoosur fuckin' deed inaw! Baith oh yees.'

The boy limped away and disappeared over the other side of the embankment, in the direction of Priesthill.

'Kenny, get Wee Tommy's ball into its net. I'll get the other clubs and the jam jars.'

'Ronnie, what if he dies?'

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'No, he'll not die. Don't worry, Kenny, you saw nothing. Come on, move. Let's get away before Bernie gets back with the rest of the gang. Here's your mashie. Use it if you have to.'

We were running now. When we reached the farmer's fields we could see Alda and the other two boys ahead of us, half way up the slope. They were running too, only slower, because of Wee Tommy. I was struggling because I had bare feet.

I shouted, 'Alda, wait. Did you get my shoes and socks?'

He stopped, turned, held them up, dropped them then chased after the other two.

While I was pulling on my wet shoes I said to Ronnie. 'Do you know what gang it is?'

'Probably the Young Pollok Cumbie.'

'Will they come to Arden after us?'

'How do they know we're from Arden? Anyway, no, I don't think so. Terry and Bernie will be ashamed to admit it was a wee lassie who beat them in a fair fight, specially since it was me. So, Kenny McKinlay, listen to me. You have to forget what happened and just stick to the story that you were up watching the shielder, all right? You saw nothing of the fight, all right?'

'But what if the police come?'

'No, the O'Briens'll never go to the police. Terry's been in borstal twice, maybe more. He's nearly old enough to get sent to prison next time. Granny Heaney's told me over and over, "Ronnie hen, you watch out for that Terry O'Brien, he is pure poison. He'll spend his life behind bars, unless someone kills him first". And look at this Kenny,' she showed me his knife.

It was long and had a fancy pearl handle. She pressed the white button and it flicked open, revealing a long thin point. It looked razor sharp. She re-closed, taking care not to cut herself then threw it over the hedge into the barley field.

'Kenny, if you hadn't warned me, he would have slashed my throat. Then he'd have had to kill you too, because you're a witness. He's the one that's mental, not me.'

'But Ronnie, are you sure he doesn't know where you live?'

'I don't know. Maybe he *could* find out. The O'Briens used to live in Cumberland Street, before they went to Pollok. Our families have been enemies for years. I suppose he might be able to find out, from asking people in the Gorbals. We'll just have to wait and see.'

'What if he comes for us, with his gang?'

'Who knows, we'll just have to wait and see for that too, won't we?'

'Ronnie, we have to go to the Police and tell them what happened, so we can get protection, don't we?'

'Listen Kenny, I did my best for you all back there, right? At least you didn't run away. Don't worry, it's me he's after, not you. You didn't do anything to him, did you? It'll be weeks before he's able to fight. Don't worry, all right?'

'I suppose.'

'So, Kenny McKinlay, that's a promise, right? You just say fuck all! D'you hear me? Not even to Alda, right? Not even to your mammie, right? If I hear anything, even the slightest wee

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cheep of what happened back there, I'll know right away it was you. Now, do you promise, Kenny?'

I had always been a wee bit scared of Ronnie and as I looked into her yellow-green eyes, I saw the glint of a physical threat. My face was red hot and my hands were clammy. I wanted to pee. I wanted away from her. 'Yes, Ronnie, I promise, I won't say a thing, not to anyone, not ever.'

She ran ahead to Alda and the other two, toting their golf clubs like rifles, one over each shoulder. I expect she swore them to secrecy as well, although I knew I was the only one who actually saw what she had done. I kept walking, but keeping my distance from Ronnie and the others ahead of me, turning every so often to check we were not being chased by the Young Pollok Cumbie.

The others arrived home before me and when I reached our close there was no sign of them. I hung Wee Tommy's football in its net on his door handle and rang the bell and ran away. Then I told my Mum that I had a really sore tummy so I did not have to go out to play or even go the messages. The next day I stayed near home. On the third day after the fight Mrs. Heaney, told us that Veronica was away, having a special holiday with her cousins. She offered no further details.

Ronnie did not return to Arden or to our school. None of us wanted to talk of that day when we had run away from the Shady Brook.

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During the remaining weeks of that particular school holiday, Alda and I avoided fishing trips and instead developed a strong interest in proper pitch and putt, playing at the short course at Rouken Glen Park. After a few days the man in the box let us play round as many times as we wished, at no extra charge. Travelling to and from this elite venue we spent hours searching for golf balls and birds' nests in the hedges beside Deaconsbank Golf Course and in the woods at Spiersbridge. One time we saw a flight of baby Blue Tits learning to fly. We could hardly believe how small the nest hole was.

Gradually over these weeks the memory of the violence I had witnessed on that summer's morning faded. I began to think it had not happened. One rainy day near Christmas Alda and I were in his bedroom, playing darts. He was good at darts and always beat me. He quizzed me about how we got away from Drainpipes and his gang. Stupidly I gave in and told him everything, then swore him to secrecy. That was a mistake. A few days later I was quizzed first by my mother and then jointly by both parents. My father would not let matters rest and went upstairs to see Kitty Heaney. What she told him I do not know.

When he returned he said, "Right, Kenny McKinlay, listen very carefully, son. If anything like this happens again you must tell your Mum and me right away. No more of this 'keeping secrets' nonsense. You could've got yourself killed. These Gorbals people are crazy, crazy. If

Brook

anything like this ever happens again, run away. Don't get involved. Run away, right? Just get yourself home here safe to us. Right, Kenny? Now promise us you'll do as you're told."

It would be many years before I would meet Ronnie Heaney again.

Day of Reckoning

At first I was uncertain. She was calling herself Vera Docherty, but her yellow-green eyes and bright red hair convinced me it was Ronnie. I was in my final year studying engineering at Strathclyde University. Like me, she was a mature student, now wearing a silver ring which I took to be a wedding band. She was at the entrance to the Students' Union, surrounded by a mixed group of supporters, canvassing for votes, trying to get elected as President of the Students' Union.

Ronnie had changed from a scrawny, scruffy tomboy into a tall, willowy, sexy young woman. She still wore her hair short, but now with a single thin and beaded ponytail. She was poured into a lime green tee-shirt, the outline of her nipples proving she was bra-less. Her white pelmet of leather mini-skirt was tiny. Her slim tanned legs stretched down to sandals with leather straps around her ankles - a Viking warrior maiden. She was one of the most stunning women I have ever seen. Even now, over forty years later, if I close my eyes I can conjure her up.

When I stopped in front of her, she smiled, flashed perfect white teeth, puzzled. Perhaps it was my beard that confused her.

'Ronnie, it's me, Kenny McKinlay, from Arden, remember?'

'Ah, right, gotcha!' She stepped in close to me and whispered in my ear. 'Come over here for a wee minute Kenny, would you?' She smelled of patchouli oil.

I followed her into a small room. A few people were sprawled around a Formica table, smoking.

'Hi, people.' she said brightly. 'We need a few minutes. Skadoodle and get yourselves a coffee. Now! Please.'

She locked the door. Again she stepped closer and for a mad second I thought she was going to kiss me. Then her smile hardened into a scowl below angry eyes.

'You and me, Kenny McKinlay, have unfinished business. But first, I take it I can count on your vote in the election?'

'Yes, I suppose so. I'm not that political. I might not bother voting.'

'Kenny, I'll ask again, nicely, can I count on your vote?'

'OK, yes, if you want, yes.'

'So, that's a definite promise?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Remind me, Kenny, you're right handed, yeah?'

'Yes.'

Brook

She grabbed my left pinkie and twisted it, wrenching my hand round and up my back. The pain was excruciating.

'Ronnie, for fuck's sake.'

She let go and pushed me way. I turned to face her, nursing one hand in the other.

'You didn't keep your last promise to me, did you, Kenny fucking McKinlay? No, you blabbed it all over Arden. Did you ever think what would have happened that day if I had sat up in the tree and stayed stum? I told you what Terry O'Brien was like, didn't I? I told you never admit to anyone what I did to him, didn't I? But oh no, you had to blab it about, force him into action. You have no idea what trouble that caused me and my family. Now fuck off, Kenny. If we meet again, you don't know me and I don't know you. I have a different life now, OK? Out!'

That was the last I ever saw of her.

I did vote for Vera Docherty but she did not win.

ooOoo

Last month I read the obituary of Veronica (Vera) Gilders. The picture showed a very glamorous Ronnie in her heyday. From this I learned that for most of her life she had lived in London, working in public relations.

Aged 55 and newly divorced, she had moved to New York. Within two years she had risen to become the Executive Vice President of Gilders Inc. The next year she married the recently divorced owner, Ted Gilders, a media mogul, a man responsible for electing several US Presidents and Vice-Presidents, her fourth marriage.

Veronica Heaney left no children of record.

Her death from cancer followed a short illness. From her personal wealth of US\$56 million, Vera Gilders donated US\$13 million to the Scottish Trust for Ornithology and US \$40 million to establish a support service for the families of long term prisoners held in Scotland's prisons.

On cold and damp days my left pinkie still aches badly. This takes me back to that perfect summer's day at the Shady Brook and I shudder anew at the flashback of Ronnie with my yellow-handled mashie, raining blows at Terry O'Brien's shoulder until he let the knife fall from his grasp and screamed into unconsciousness.

ⁱ Scotland Street School Museum read more at:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scotland_Street_School_Museum

Brook

ⁱⁱ The Shady Brook was the name we gave to the Brock Burn which acts as a natural topographical divider between Arden and Priesthill. Read more at:

<http://www.damstodarnley.org/mining-quarrying-and-the-landfill-legacy.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Barras or Barrowland, the Glasgow institution comprising many market traders' stall selling goods old, new and items that have fallen from the back of a lorry. Read more at:

<http://www.glasgow-barrowland.com/market/barras.htm>