

Mario Lanza

'Mum, the torch needs a new battery.'

'Let me see it,' said Betty. She put it in the side oven of the coal-fired stove. 'Give it five minutes and it'll be fine. And keep your voice down, Johnny, don't waken the wee ones.'

Living in a single end in Glasgow's Pollokshaws area, Betty and Jack and their three boys, shared an outside toilet with their neighbours. It was a WC only with no washbasin, in a backyard with no lighting. This older part of Pollokshaws would soon be redeveloped under a slum clearance programme when the Bonthrons would be sent to Arden, a new housing scheme under construction two miles away, a place without shops, schools, churches or community services.

'But Mu-um, I'm desperate. It's a big one.'

'Then use the potty, Johnny.'

'But Mum, I don't want to use the potty. I'm ten now and it's too wee for my bottom.'

'Then you'll just have to hold it in until your dad comes home and you can use his bicycle torch.'

'But Mu-um, I'll miss Dan Dare.'

'Oh, for goodness sake, Dan Dare is not on for ages.'

'I can't hold it in until Dad get's home, I just can't.'

'Well, let's try it again.' Betty took the torch out, gave it a shake and switched it on. A dim glimmer showed in the bulb. 'There you are Johnny, plenty of light to see by. Off you go and make sure you wipe your bottom properly. Here, put the key round your neck. The last thing we need is you losing it again. We don't want "you know who" using our nice clean toilet, do we? Oh, and put on your wellies and your raincoat, it's starting to rain.'

I ran to the toilet and reached up on my tiptoes to put the Yale key in the lock. My father had fitted it high, to stop children forcing bits of stick into it, trying to open it, for devilment, just because it was locked. Our toilet was the right hand-one, shared by the downstairs tenants and kept spotlessly clean by my mother. Unlike ours, the toilet for the upstairs tenants did not have a toilet seat. Its door had only a latch. According to my mother, it was used by "all and sundry" and had not been cleaned "since the dawn of time". Its floor was always wet from urine, the pan dirty with skid marks and usually there was no toilet paper. The smell from it was very noticeable, even in winter. In summer it was a haven for flies.

The key string was too short. I pulled it off to get the key in the lock. Once inside and seated, the lamp dimmed then went out and I was alone in the dark with my fears. Part of our backyard was used as a mortuary and embalming workshop and featured regularly in my nightmares. I had recently read a library book about David Livingstone in Africa and easily imagined our backyard to be a jungle filled with prowling lions, swallowing snakes, huge poisonous spiders and silent ghouls with skeleton bodies and grasping claws for hands.

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From outside I heard the voice of old Dunky McCluskey our neighbour. He lived directly across the close from us and, as usual, he was muttering incoherently to himself in his Irish tongue. An occasional road mender, if he had money, Dunky spent most of it in the pub. He lived a bachelor life, surviving on fish suppers or pies and beans heated on his coal-fired stove. Like us he had a single gas mantle but could never afford the gas meter and used the glow of his coal range for lighting, heating and cooking. We had a small gas stove with two-rings and a grill pan for toasting. A few months earlier, my Uncle Billy Mac had installed a single electric lamp and a plug point used for an electric iron and a small radio, both old hand-me-down items from richer relatives.

From Dunky's mutterings he was having problems getting his coal cellar door open. A long row of rickety lean-to cellars lined the wall across the backyard from the toilets, one for each of the eight tenants who shared our building and a few more for the richer people who lived in the fancy tiled close of the soaring tenement building at 84, Greenview Street. At that time, this was a busy street lined with shops of all kinds and a terminus where trams turned to go back to Glasgow or ran through to the depot at Newlands.

This soaring three-storey sandstone tenement hid our humbler low-rise block which comprised four single ends on the ground floor mirrored by four above, these accessed by an open stone stairway with well-worn treads and no handrail. According to my mother, our building "was built in the year dot". The ground floor houses were riddled with wet and dry rot while those upstairs suffered ingress from a leaky roof, water which at times ran down to wet the inside of our walls.

I have no clear recollection of our upstairs neighbours except that they were rough people who swore and spat a lot. I do not remember any children among them. My mother kept clear of them, saying they were "not nice people". I was warned to be "always polite but not to engage in conversation with them". Thinking back, I suspect they were heavy drinkers; my mother was teetotal.

As I sat in the darkness waiting for the big event, I heard shouting and running feet. Within minutes there was a huge commotion in progress. It was not just Dunky, there were other voices too.

'Rats, hunners o' rats. Fur God's sake Dunky, urr they fae your cellar?'

'Whit? Whit did ye say?'

'Quick, gie us yerr shovel n' Ah'll smack thum wi' it.'

The much posher voice of Andy Arbuckle from Number 84 rose above the commotion: 'No, Teresa Donovan put that shovel down. Those are my guinea pigs. They're worth a lot of money. I'm breeding them to sell to a pet shop in Giffnock.'

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Andy and my father had been in the same class at school. Andy and May had good jobs and, according to my Mum, "lived in the lap of luxury". They had no children but they did have a television. Occasionally I was invited into their posh house to watch Hopalong Cassidy and his sidekick Lucky with their horse which was called Topper, I think. I always remember May made me take off my shoes at the door and leave them outside on a newspaper. Inside she gave me a pair of visitors' slippers to wear and put an old sheet on her settee for me to sit on. Then she gave me a cup of Lemon and Lime lemonade and a Wagon Wheel with a saucer to catch crumbs.

Outside my toilet, Andy Arbuckle was in firm control. The light of a bright torch flashed under the door of my toilet then a guinea pig squeezed through the gap and tried to climb up my legs. I struck out at the animal with my torch then kicked at it while pulling up my pants and shorts then jumped up on the seat.

'Help! Help! Mr Arbuckle, one of your guinea pigs is biting me!'

'Is that you in there Johnny Bonthron?'

'Yes, Mr Arbuckle. It's back on the floor.'

The guinea pig decided it had had enough of me and squeezed back out under the door.

'Ah, there you are my wee darling, come to your daddy, there's a good girl.'

I waited until the commotion was over, then, re-seated, I tried to finish my business. I could feel I still wanted to do it but somehow it just would not come. Alone in the dark, I began to imagine scraping and squeaking sounds and thought there must still be escaped guinea pigs out there sniffing around, getting ready to attack when they found me.

To fend off these thoughts I began to sing through my gospel songs from the Salvation Army Band of Hope.

Onward, Christian Soldiers.

What a Friend we have in Jesus!

Jesus wants me for a sunbeam.

Deep and Wide.

Far round the World.

Jesus bids me shine.

He's got the whole World.

Will your Anchor Hold?

The Lord's my Shepherd.

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The toilet door flew open and my father, his cap sodden and his cape dripping, shone his bicycle torch on me. He had arrived home at last, returning late from working overtime as a joiner on a building site in Paisley, Foxbar, I think it was.

'OK Mario Lanza, time to get washed for bed.'

'But Da-ad, I haven't finished yet. I can feel it coming now. Can I borrow your lamp, please? Mum said you would let me.'

'OK, Johnny, but remember to wipe your bottom. I'll take the key so you don't lose it again. Make sure you shut the door tight. We don't want "you know who" using it, do we? And hurry up or you'll miss Dan Dare.'