

Pact

It was a Tuesday in early July during the second week of the long school summer holidays. In August the two twelve-year-olds would start at secondary school together.

'Did you get any money, Johnny?'

'No, my Mum is skint again.'

Immediately Johnny let these words escape, he felt guilty. He knew most of his Mum's secrets and was routinely sworn to 'keep his own council', to keep his knowledge of her various debts strictly to himself. Dad was never to find out.

'Let's go and try to get some lead or copper from the Ammo Works. We could take it to that scrappies in Pollokshaws. Maybe we'll get enough to go to the Swimming Baths.'

'My Dad said I can't go to the Ordnance Factory. He said it's too dangerous.'

'Eff it, I'll get Tommy Ingram to come with me.'

This was a familiar threat but it nearly always worked.

'OK, I'll come, but what will we do for swimming trunks?'

'They've always got old pairs they'll lend you. We'll hire one towel between the two of us.'

Two horrible thoughts rose in Johnny's head,

Routinely the fair-haired Alistair had head lice. Johnny had been warned repeatedly by his Mum to stay avoid head contact. She had showed him lice crawling about on the bone comb she used to remove them from his head. The smell of the disinfectant ointment made his eyes water.

And the thought of using someone else's swimming lost trunks filled him with disgust.

Alistair was already running off. Johnny did not want to be called a sissy again. If he hung about the tenement close for much longer, he knew he would probably be lumbered with his three younger brothers.

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Alistair was two months older than Johnny. They had been in the same class at Sir John Maxwell primary in Pollokshaws, travelling to and from Arden using a school bus pass. In class tests they usually got about the same marks. Johnny was the eldest of four brothers. Alistair was number three of four boys, his oldest brother now working. Being more confident, Alistair was more dominant, easily bending Johnny to his will.

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The two boys were part of a larger group of twenty-two children who lived in the same tenement close in a new housing scheme thrown up on the outskirts of Glasgow as part of the slum clearance programme of the early nineteen fifties. Eight families decanted from all over Glasgow, forced together with diverse histories, mores and sub-cultures which caused low level frictions as each family tried to establish itself in this new pecking order.

Only two mothers from these eight families worked, both in offices. These two women routinely wore make-up, considering themselves a cut above the others. The truth of it was that nearly every family in the street struggled financially though most held to the pretence that this new life was better in every way, despite the lack of any of the amenities they had previously taken for granted.

In Arden during those early years there were no schools, churches, shops, Doctors' Surgeries, Dentists' or pubs or clubs. Everything of their old lives had to be reached after a long walk to a tram terminus followed by a shoogole of up to an hour each way to reach 'civilisation'.

For their children a bonus was they were on the edge of an alien land called the countryside, with farms, milking cows and various crops. There was a small river called the Shady Book¹ which could be visited by trekking through a field of frightening cows or running through a field of growing barley. These children were urban and feral with no knowledge of country ways. Mostly their parents knew nothing of their new secret lives.

These urban children were destructive of trees, raiding birds' nests and trampling across the local farmer's crops. They ran wild and often in a large pack of a dozen or more. They lit 'camp' fires and played at Cowboys and Indians or Soldiers. Routinely they were chased by an angry farmer with his two ferocious barking dogs and sworn at loudly as they scattered in various directions, compounding their misdemeanours by destroying even more of his crop.

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On that fateful summer's day the two friends were heading to what had been an Ordnance Factory on the edge of a village two miles away. The sprawl of buildings had been abandoned some years earlier. It had been left unprotected except for an elderly watchman and his old friendly dog. What remained of these buildings had suffered the normal ravages of urban exploitation. Most of the easy lead sheeting and copper piping had long disappeared but Alistair claimed to have special knowledge, information from a village boy called Peter who, Alistair claimed, had given him a live bullet. Johnny had not been allowed to see this treasure and was not sure he wanted to.

¹ Proper name is the Brock Burn, read 'Brook' at <https://www.thebuzzinbee.co.uk/updates/2016/02/brook/>

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When they arrived at the factory there was a group of five boys attacking a building with a crowbar and a sledge-hammer, systematically destroying a high wall by smashing and levering out bricks from its edges, anywhere the weak mortar would free a brick or group of bricks.

'Hey you, eff off, this is our wall, find somewhere else,' shouted an older, sturdy boy whose eyes had a strange angry look in them. Although he was small, this boy had the beginnings of a moustache. Johnny thought the other boys seemed normal, about his own age.

'C'mon, Johnny, let's go,' muttered Alistair quietly. That's Mad Donnie MacDonald, one of the Home boys. They say he's killed five people but so far he hasn't been caught.'

Alistair and Johnny had had two Home boys in their class at school in P6 and P7. These boys were easily recognisable by their grey shorts; grey shirts buttoned to the collar, grey pullovers and their shiny black tackety boots with segs on the soles. These Home Boys stuck together in silence. They never cried when they were given the belt. The strange boy was not wearing normal Home clothes worn at school. Johnny thought maybe they were given other clothes for playing in during the holidays.

The two incomers drifted off, moving steadily but not running which might show weakness. Out of sight they found a doorway that led into a large, gloomy building. The door was missing, presumably stolen. Concealing their fear, they moved forward slowly, walking over debris of crunching glass, broken bricks and bits of wood. They reached a dark internal stairway which led up through three floors to the topmost floor, the most likely source of lead. The rooflight was bereft of glass making this floor light and airy. At first Johnny felt safer until a pigeon exploded from somewhere scaring them as it powered up to fly out off through the open roof-light.

There was a strong smell of damp, decay and urine. In a corner they saw a single, large dried out faeces. Johnny wished he could escape, go home or go to somewhere safe, like the woods near Deaconsbank Golf Course where they had found a Blue Tit's nest in a hole in a tree with seven chicks, tiny feathered bundles which they lifted out and set free, watching them flutter from branch to branch, cheeping for their parents.

'Alistair, I need to do the toilet, can we go outside.'

'Is it just a pee?'

'Yes.'

'Aw for eff's sake, Johnny, just do it over there in the corner, it doesn't matter. Everybody has already done it, can't you smell it?'

Reluctantly Johnny found a corner, turned away for privacy, and began to relieve himself.

He was beside a window. The glass was cracked and dirty but not yet smashed out.

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Johnny saw it happen, as if in a film.

The watchman hobbled along with his dog and stood on the other side of the wall from the boys. He seemed to be shouting but Johnny could not hear anything.

The wall began to topple, falling slowly at first, staying together as a slab but then the bricks parted, disintegrating into rubble. The old man waved his stick at it. The old dog lay down at his feet.

The rubble hit them, covered them.

When the dust settled, there was no sign of the man or his dog.

Donnie MacDonald and his gang were now visible, standing in a line on the other side of where the wall had stood. They were frozen, like statues, silent, staring at the pile of rubble.

Johnny finished doing his stream and buttoned up.

'What the eff was that racket?' said Alistair, arriving at the dirty window beside him.

'Alistair, they've just killed the Watchie and his dog. They made that wall fall on him.'

'For eff's sake Johnny, you're kidding me! Tell me you're kidding me!'

'No, the old man and his dog got buried under the wall. Honest Alistair, that's what happened. And I think one of the boys might have seen me watching. It all happened like in slow motion.'

'Jesus Christ all Mighty. C'mon, Johnny, run. We've got to get away from here before Mad Donnie catches us. C'mon, run!'

They flew down the stairs and ran as fast as they could, never looking back, instinctively running for the abandoned railway line which had served the factory, a single track spur called the 'Puggy line' named after the small steam shunting engine which had hauled the goods wagons in and out of the factory before its closure.

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A long time later they stopped and threw themselves down into the barley field, panting, still high on the adrenaline of fear and flight. Neither boy wished to be the first to speak. The enormity of what had happened whirled them into mutual isolation. The sun was behind the scudding clouds and it was cooler now.

'Johnny, are you really sure?'

'Yes.'

'Johnny, I didn't see anything except a big pile of bricks.'

'But you know it happened, Alistair, you know it happened.'

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'Johnny, we're innocent but if they find out we were there they'll send us to Borstal.'

'I know.'

'So we have to sign a pact, seal it with blood.'

'What for?'

'To swear that we'll never tell anyone what happened.'

'All right. But what about Mad Donnie and his gang.'

'We don't know what happened, we weren't there, remember? So we need to have a good story for the police if they question us.'

'So where shall we say we were?'

'At the Shady Brook, up at the deep bit where everyone else is too scared to go.'

'Do we have to go there? My Dad warned me not to.'

'Aw for eff's sake Johnny, no we don't really have to go there! But that's our story and we have to stick to it, all right?'

'Yes, I get it.'

'So, can you do it, Johnny, can you keep it a secret?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Right this is pact for life, okay?'

'Okay.'

'Right, let's find a bit of glass and seal it with blood, thumb to thumb.'

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It took nearly two weeks for the old man and his dog to be found. It was the smell and the bluebottles which led to the discovery, according to Alistair's older brother.

Much later Johnny's father told him the Coroner had returned a verdict of "Death by Misadventure".

Johnny and Alistair never discussed the matter again and it faded in their memories.

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Twenty three years later Johnny read in the *Glasgow Herald* that a Sergeant Donnie MacDonald was posthumously awarded a Military Cross for bravery in the face of extreme danger during a skirmish, somewhere in Africa. The face of the long ago Home boy, now a man with a small moustache, looked out from the photograph with the same frightening psychopathic stare.