

Sealed

It was a Tuesday during the second week of the long school summer holidays. In August the two boys would start at secondary school together.

'Do you get any money, Johnny?'

'No, my Mum is skint again.'

Immediately Johnny had let the 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 there, it's too dangerous.'

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

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

'They've always got old pairs they'll give 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 by his Mum to stay well away from direct contact. Johnny had been shown them crawling about on the bone comb: the smell of the disinfectant ointment made his eyes water. The thought of using someone else's swimming 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 close, he would probably be lumbered with his three younger brothers.

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Alistair was two months older than Johnny. They were in the same class at school and usually they got about the same marks. But Alistair was number three of four boys, his oldest brother now working. He was more dominant, easily bending Johnny to his will.

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, flung 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

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of 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. During those early years there were no schools, churches, shops, Doctors' Surgeries, Dentists or pubs or clubs. Everything of their old life had to be reached after a long walk to a tram terminus followed by a shoogle of up to an hour each way.

For their children a bonus was that 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 Book 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. They were destructive of trees, birds' nests and the farmers' crops. They ran wild and often in a large pack of a dozen or more. They lit small 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.

On that 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.

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When they arrived at the factory there was a group of five boys who had a crowbar and a sledge-hammer. They were 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 a small sturdy boy whose eyes had a strange angry look in them. He had the beginnings of a moustache. The other boys seemed normal, about his own age, Johnny thought.

'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.'

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Alistair and Johnny had two Home boys in their class at school. These boys were easily recognisable by their grey shorts; grey shirts buttoned to the collar, grey pullovers and their shiny black tacky boots. These Home Boys stuck together in silence. They never cried when they were given the belt.

The strange boy had not worn Home clothes but maybe they were given other clothes for playing in during the holidays, Johnny thought.

The two friends drifted off. They found a dark doorway that led into a large building. The door had been removed. They entered, walking over debris of crunching glass, broken brick and bits of wood to the stairway which spiralled up underneath a roof-light bereft of glass. It was light here and felt safe. Suddenly a pigeon exploded from somewhere scaring them as it powered up to fly out of the roof-light.

At the top floor there was a smell of damp, decay and urine. Johnny wished he could escape, go home or go somewhere safe, like the Shady Brook.

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

'You need a pee?'

'Yes.'

'Aw for eff's sake, Johnny, just do it 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 but not yet smashed out.

He saw it happen. It happened in slow motion.

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 disintegrated into rubble. The old man waved his stick at it. The old dog lay down at his feet. The rubble hit them, covered them. Dust filled the air. When it cleared there was no sign of the man or the dog.

Donnie MacDonald and his gang were now visible, standing in a line on the other side of where the wall stood. They were frozen.

Johnny finished doing his stream and buttoned up.

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

'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.'

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

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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.

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.'

'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?'

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'Oh. But where were we then?'

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

'Do we have to go there?'

'Aw for eff's sake, Johnny, **no** we don't 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, let's find a bit of glass and seal it with blood.'

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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, Johnny's Dad had said.

Later he told them that the Coroner 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 John 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 boy, now a man with a small moustache, looked out from the photograph with the same frightening psychopathic stare.