LYRA McKEE

Lost, Found, Remembered

FABER & FABER

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They say that for years Belfast was backwards
and it's great now to see some progress.
So I guess we can look forward to taking boxes
from the earth. I guess that ambulances
will leave the dying back amidst the rubble
to be explosively healed. Given time,
one hundred thousand particles of glass
will create impossible patterns in the air
before coalescing into the clarity
of a window. Through which, a reassembled head
will look out and admire the shy young man
taking his bomb from the building and driving
home.

'Progress', Alan Gillus

Editor's Note

As a writer Lyra McKee was drawn to subjects that are usually met with silence. She wrote about growing up gay in Northern Ireland, the epidemic of suicide among her generation in Belfast, and in her book for Faber, *The Lost Boys*, she was investigating the unsolved disappearances of children during the Troubles. She could always see the imprint of the Troubles in the graves freshly dug for those too young to fully remember the conflict, and it is heartbreaking that a continuation of that violence cut short her life. Lyra McKee asked the right questions and reported on the things that matter.

In publishing this posthumous book, our intention is to commemorate her writing and magnify her voice. The book is curated into three sections: unpublished work in 'Lost', pieces that may be less familiar to the reader in 'Found', and the pieces that cemented her reputation as one of her generation's most formidable journalists in 'Remembered'. This book is both a celebration of her talent and a reminder of what we have lost.

LOST

In My Own Words

I grew up in a 'conflict hotspot' in North Belfast, off a road known as Murder Mile because of the number of people who were killed on it during the Troubles. The Cliftonville Road – where I was born and reared – is said to have had more casualties per square foot during the war than any other part of the country. I've written extensively about the conflict because I know it so intimately. I witnessed its last years, as armed campaigns died and gave way to an uneasy tension we natives of Northern Ireland have named 'peace', and I lived with its legacy, watching friends and family members cope with the trauma of what they could not forget.

I dropped out of university aged nineteen. In 2006, I won the 'Sky News Young Journalist of the Year' for a story looking at rising suicide rates in my native North Belfast. I've been published in the *Atlantic*, *BuzzFeed News*, *Mosaic Science*, the *Independent*, and many other newspapers and magazines. In 2016, *Forbes* named me one of their 30 Under 30 best journalists in Europe. I have delivered newsroom training to journalists at newspapers including

Extracted from The Lost Boys' *author biography*

the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sunday Times*. I have also worked for the Thomson Reuters Foundation, mentoring and overseeing investigations into financial corruption by Africa-based journalists.

I have spoken at events all over the world, including Techraking, a conference jointly organised by Google and the California Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR), journalism.co.uk's News Rewired event in London, the International Journalism Festival in Perugia, Italy, and TEDxStormont in Belfast. In 2014, 'Letter to My Fourteen-Year-Old Self', a story describing my experience of growing up as a gay person in Northern Ireland, went viral. It was later developed into the short film *Letter*, produced by Belfast-based production company Stay Beautiful films. It has since been screened at a US film festival.

I know very well how the Troubles masked other crimes; how women, children and vulnerable people were harmed because child abusers and killers and men who beat their wives don't stop doing what they do because there's a war on. In fact, they carry on because they can – because a police force and judicial system distracted by a war tend to overlook 'ordinary' criminals. And sometimes, they carry on because the war has turned them into a 'protected species' – like an IRA or UVF member who raped women

but was too valuable to the organisation to be punished and who was secretly feeding information to the security services and was therefore too valuable an asset to them, too. Lots of awful things are done in the name of winning wars, but they are eventually reckoned with when the conflict ends and the families of the dead speak up about their loved ones.

Lyra wrote this poem inside her copy of the anthology Slow Time *when she was fourteen. She had submitted the poem with a letter to say that she hoped to be a full-time poet one day.*

Time is running out
Day is reigning longer than night
I used to take refuge in the stars
Each one marking an hour of time
Six and a half, a snatched moment here and there
To confess a truth, hidden, like pink
Blossoms, in white Dalmatian snow

Now the stars' brightness
Cannot be seen amid the sun's brightness
And I must tell all, and hear the truth
Before the stars no longer mark
A passage of time that I can see during waking hours
Before I must be on my way
Confess these truths
Love, in its own language, means
Seize the day

This poem is taken from a collection Lyra wrote when she was thirteen entitled Changing with the Seasons.

Awaiting the Snowflakes

I had that dream
During the prelude season to autumn
She told me grave, bitter news.
The doctors may as well have shattered my heart
With one of their fancy surgical knives.
Our dreams, not only my vital organs
Were cut into tiny slivers.
A new house in the spring awaited
She only had till Christmas.

Away from the harsh realities of fantasy
I walked along the shore.
The dark, choppy waters
Mirroring my thoughts.
Thoughts residing at God's mercy
Where I fervently prayed
For anything but her missing presence.
She was silent
Knowing not to bother me
Not knowing why.

My prayers were answered
Yet at the expense of someone else
Harbouring only a few weeks to live, I heard,
'A pity she didn't have till Christmas':
The snowflakes had yet to fall.

The following pieces are all excerpted from the book Lyra was working on at the time of her death: The Lost Boys. *They have not been published previously.*

They call my generation the 'Ceasefire Babies', though I've always hated that name. I hated the mocking tone in which it was usually said, as if growing up in the nineties in Belfast was a stroll. There were still soldiers on the street when I was a kid. I remember them – in uniforms and maroon berets, at checkpoints, on pavements, crouching down on one knee, as if ducking out of sight of an enemy the surrounding civilians couldn't see. I remember walking past one with my sister, then aged about sixteen, after she had picked me up from school. 'Do they wear hats on their heads to stop them from getting cold?' I'd asked, or something inane to that effect. 'Yes,' she'd replied, smiling, and the pale-skinned recruit I'd gestured to had smiled as well. Blond hair peeked out from underneath his cap. He looked barely older than her, perhaps eighteen. That was around the time I learned that the toy gun I used for games of Cowboys and Indians could not be brought outside, in case a passing patrol saw it and mistook it for a real one. It didn't matter that it was silver with an orange trumpet-top on the end of the barrel; you couldn't take any chances.

It had happened, my mother assured me, to a little boy, on the same street where I'd seen the teen soldier. I was never sure if this was truth or urban legend, but the only time I took the gun outside, to the backyard – which was surrounded by a ten-foot concrete wall – I'd had the arse smacked off me. The helicopters were out; what if they'd seen it with their cameras, my mother said, and thought it was real? The scenario seemed unlikely to me: that a helicopter, thousands of feet up in the air, would spot a kid playing with a toy and send a patrol to our house. But my mother wasn't taking any chances.

*

Northern Ireland had a way of burying uncomfortable truths, just like it buried its dead. Grief operated according to a strict hierarchy here back then. If your loved one had been killed in the Troubles, you were guaranteed the attention of local politicians. Conflict victims were a unique form of political currency, bartered by each side. Victims of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) would regularly be rolled out by the Unionists; Army and police victims, by the Republicans. Those whose loved ones had been involved with the paramilitaries received less

sympathy, particularly if they were Protestants, but at some point, they would see their loved one's name mentioned in the paper. They wouldn't be allowed to forget what had happened. Journalists wanted to talk to them, even if they didn't want to talk back.

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Things have changed since the ceasefire. I think it's possible, for the first time – for someone of my generation – to write about the conflict from a historical perspective. And yet, like so much of the recent past, it's haunting, too. It's all still there, just underneath the surface of things. A friend of mine, the documentary maker Ali Millar, has an office in South Belfast, at the edge of a district which was battered during the Troubles. At the corner of the street, a mural on the side of a house commemorates William of Orange, who'd landed in the country three centuries before. Every July, local residents in the mostly Protestant area celebrate him with a day of marching, a country-wide event which has been branded 'Orangefest' by the tourism board, in an attempt to make it more PR-friendly to visitors. Natives, though, called it the Twelfth. In rural parts, it is centred around innocent family activities, but in the city

– in the form that I knew it – it could often descend into drunken riots and fights with the neighbouring Catholic community or the police.

What was most interesting about the mural, though, was what it had replaced. It had been carefully painted over the top of another, less tourist-friendly image, this one of a man in a balaclava holding a semi-automatic rifle, with the words 'YOU ARE NOW ENTERING LOYALIST SANDY ROW HEARTLAND OF SOUTH BELFAST ULSTER FREEDOM FIGHTERS' emblazoned in bold, black type, framed by icons of red fists. One man's freedom fighter was another man's terrorist, and to many of the Protestant population and their Catholic neighbours, the freedom fighters who had been commemorated in this memorial were just that – terrorists. The area was a thirty-second walk from the Great Victoria Street station, the terminus point for visitors arriving from the local airports or Dublin by bus.

Sometimes, you'd walk by and see them – tourists with cameras, hovering in front of William's painting, seemingly oblivious to what had been on the wall before it. Throughout the city, murals dedicated to the terror groups who'd once ruled the districts were slowly being erased. It was a whitewashing of the past and it was happening

because we were desperate for the world to know us for any reason other than war. Maybe we were trying to erase our own memories, hoping for a collective amnesia by blotting out reminders of what had happened. But all you had to do was scratch the paint and you'd find the city's past, like a ghost that refused to depart for the other world.

*

A History of the Troubles Accordin' to a Ceasefire Baby

When the conflict ended in Northern Ireland, the fight turned from guns to history books. 'Ended' was a euphemism, I thought, because it never truly seemed to end, so much as it changed shape, with the gunmen and those in charge of them concluding that violence was not the best way to win a war. Republicans – represented mainly by Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Provisionals, and mainly emanating from the Catholic community – maintained that the British had no right to be in Northern Ireland. The Unionists – represented by numerous warring factions but mainly the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) – maintained that they did. Yet the 'constitutional question' – over whether the Northern six counties should be reunited with the Southern twenty-six counties or remain

in Britain's clasp – was not what absorbed the attention of former combatants and their supporters. Whereas before they killed those they perceived to be their enemy – combatants on the other side, civilians, police officers, priests, soldiers, children – now, they struggled with them for control of the narrative and how history would come to view them all. The debates were forever being recycled on radio and television talk shows:

'That murder was justified, he was working for the police!'

'The Royal Ulster Constabulary were a fantastic police force being gunned down by terrorists.'

'Excuse me, the IRA were not terrorists, they were freedom fighters, and they would never have had to pick up a gun if British soldiers hadn't come on to the streets and started killing civilians!'

'The British soldiers were there protecting us, they would never have had to come in if the IRA wasn't bombing innocents!'

'The IRA were freedom fighters!'

'No, they weren't, the Loyalist groups like the UVF were freedom fighters, protecting us from the IRA—'

'They were terrorists!'

'The RUC were terrorists! They were colluding with the Loyalists!'

'That's a slur on our police officers.'

'You just can't admit to what your side did! Killing innocents!'

It was endless. Between 1969 and 1998, 3,700 men, women and children had been slaughtered in bombings, shootings and more. Their killers ranged from Provisional IRA members to members of the Loyalist terror groups – the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), Ulster Defence Association (UDA), Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) – British soldiers and corrupt police officers. Whether you justified or condemned each murder sometimes depended on which one, the victim or the perpetrator, came from your community. If the murderer was one of your own, then the more hardline members of the Tribe – because that's what we were, a group thrown together by virtue of the altar we worshipped at on Sundays – expected you to lay out the reasons as to why murder was sometimes permissible. I was born into the Catholic faith, four years before the Provisional IRA announced a ceasefire and eight years before the signing of the peace accord, the Good Friday Agreement. This meant I was expected to condemn all murders of innocent Catholics and IRA/Republican volunteers, while approving the murders of 'legitimate targets' ranging

from police officers to British soldiers and any civilian or volunteer who turned 'tout' and passed information on to the security services. As for collateral damage, the poor Prods and Catholics who accidentally wandered into the path of a bomb, their deaths were regrettable but not so much that they besmirched the cause or the movement or the volunteer who'd deposited the device on a crowded street on a busy afternoon. To betray the Tribe and not stick to the script was almost as bad as being a tout. Any mention of casualties from the other side – of the children who'd died in IRA bombs or who'd witnessed their fathers being shot dead in their own living room – was never to be acknowledged, only met with a reminder of the lives lost in Loyalist bombings and shootings. Such defences had a name: 'Whataboutery'.

The Other Tribe lived by the same rules. The rules were not unique to us. We were all governed by these unspoken and unwritten laws. And yet the strange thing was, it was not always the ex-prisoners, those who'd fought for the IRA and UVF and UDA and all the other factions, who expected you to uphold the rituals and defend what they'd done. While each terror group had ideological aims – to gain a United Ireland (the IRA) or protect British rule (the UVF et al.) – the youths who'd joined them had

generally done so for what had seemed like good reasons at the time. Often, it was a death in the family that triggered their decision to sign up: a cousin who'd had his head blown off as he walked the half mile from the pub to his home, or a brother killed when he answered a knock on the front door to a gunman waiting outside. Death had been so random during the Troubles and could visit your door at any moment. I didn't agree with what they had done, but it was easy to make such moral proclamations while living in a time of peace. I'd only seen the tail end of the war, and that had been bad enough. Could I have lived through the worst of it and held on to my morals? When you were surrounded by people with guns and you didn't know if they were coming for you next, did having access to a gun yourself give you a false sense of power? Did it make you feel as if you'd reduced the odds of Death coming for your family? War was as complicated as it was ugly, and the person you were when you lived through it was probably different to the person who emerged after. Many of those calling in to the morning radio talk shows, arguing for the narrative which cast their side in the best light, hadn't spent twenty years in a 4 × 4-foot cell musing on these matters. The ex-prisoners had, and, among the ones I knew at least, joy and justification over their past

deeds were in short supply. Most were stuck somewhere between remorse and empathy for their younger selves.

When it came to ex-prisoners, certain sections of society and the media had a tendency to cast them as evil, as servants of Satan himself who were far beyond the redemption of any God or religion. I understood that. I couldn't stand in front of a woman who'd watched her husband be gunned down, in front of their children, perhaps in their own living room, and tell her that the men who'd done it were more complex than evil and more human than her grief would allow her to believe. I hadn't lost anyone. Yet still I didn't see the ex-prisoners as being beyond redemption. I'd seen evil amongst their number. I'd also seen men and women struggling to reconcile their present selves to what their past selves had done. Many were dying by the bottle or by suicide. They couldn't live with themselves. Why they wanted to hasten a meeting with their maker, I didn't know. Many of them seemed to have stopped believing in God a long time ago, so maybe they believed death was an escape into nothingness. I had friends who'd been in the IRA during the Troubles and a dear friend who'd been a cop in the RUC, trying to put as many of the former away behind bars as he possibly could, as well as their counterparts in the Loyalist groups.

The irony was that all of them, enemies who'd fought on opposing sides or sides which sometimes worked together but were more often apart, were facing the same struggles in peacetime. They all seemed to loathe sleep because sleep brought nightmares. They all woke up screaming in the middle of the night.

Many people have grown to dislike the use of the word 'war' to describe what happened here. The term 'the conflict' became a more acceptable alternative, even if it made a thirty-year battle sound like a lovers' tiff. It's got the ring of a euphemism, the kind one might use to refer to a shameful family secret during a reunion lunch. Part of the argument was that the victims felt calling it 'war' gave legitimacy to terrorist groups and their volunteers, allowed them to view themselves as soldiers – either in the cause of saving Ireland from British rule, or of saving it from those who wanted to save it from British rule.

But we were to be the generation to avoid all that. We were to reap the spoils and prosperity that supposedly came with peace. In the end, we did get the peace – or something close to it – and those who'd caused carnage in the decades before got the money. Whether they'd abandoned arms (as the Provisionals did) or retained them (like the Loyalists), they'd managed to make a ton of paper. We got to live with the outcome of their choices. But before I tell you about how my generation got fucked over, I should

probably talk a little about how the war started in the first place. You probably know this story, or parts of it, but let me tell it to you in my own words, because the answer to the question depends on who you ask, and how far back you want to go; and so my own take matters.

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Northern Ireland was created in 1921 after the southern twenty-six counties broke away from British rule, following the Easter Rising – a rebellion – five years before. The north of the country had a solid Protestant population who considered themselves British subjects and wanted to retain the link with the UK. So the rebels got their twenty-six counties, which would eventually become known as the Republic of Ireland, and the UK got to keep the remaining six. This would have been a perfectly satisfactory solution were it not for the sizable minority of Catholics left stranded there on the wrong side of the new border.

The Catholic civilians didn't protest much. They'd been all but abandoned by the rebel leaders in the South, so they might have settled down and integrated well with the majority. They were native-born, after all, and British rule was the only rule they'd ever known. But in their newly

created country, they were abandoned by London and left to face bouts of violence and discrimination. Protestants received preferential treatment in the form of housing and jobs, a status quo actively encouraged by the Unionist politicians of the time. The likes of the Harland and Wolff shipyard, which sat at the edge of East Belfast and built the *Titanic*, employed Protestants almost exclusively.

My friends and I would argue about this all the time.

'I don't remember my grandparents having any money. They lived in poverty with an outside toilet.' We were in a grimy Wetherspoon's near the edge of the student district in South Belfast, sandwiched between the city centre and the road that led to the William of Orange mural. Most of its clientele were working-class Prods. With the bus station and Queen's University nearby, it drew in its fair share of tourists and students, too. Three decades before, whatever establishment it had been then, it wouldn't have been safe for me to be there, drinking among a bunch of tattooed Loyalists, especially with such an obviously Gaelic name: 'Leer-rah'. The pronunciation would give me away instantly. In fact, it still wouldn't have been safe for me to go into a pub in a Loyalist stronghold. This place, though, was a geographical no-man's-land that anyone could lay claim to, and the Prods, tourists, students and

I drank together amiably enough, lured in by the promise of cheap food and booze. I'd been visiting Spoons on and off for ten years, first as a student and then into adulthood and the world of work; while I was definitely better off than I had been, journalism did not a luxurious lifestyle fund. Besides, it was a neutral venue for meeting Will. Like mine, his name gave him away – William was usually a name reserved for Prods. We could have met near my place; the area I lived in was becoming slowly gentrified, with a mix of Protestants and Catholics moving in, but the local pubs still retained their more hardened clientele – people who'd supported the IRA and would have bristled had they thought there was a Loyalist in their midst. The ex-prisoners themselves, those who'd actually been in the organisation or one of its splinter groups, were much more relaxed; they'd probably have bought him a pint. That could have been said of ex-prisoners in general; it was always the armchair commandos who were the rowdiest. Will was from the east of the city, but I felt too nervous to venture into one of the working men's pubs there. So, Spoons it was, barely a two-minute walk from the city centre and a halfway point between us. 'How were your grandparents any worse off than mine?' We'd had this argument before – always in Spoons.

'Because yours were given jobs,' I said. 'And housing. Look at what happened in Caledon.'

Caledon was a tiny village in County Tyrone, near the border with the Republic of Ireland. There, in 1967, a family called the Gildernews had decided to squat in a house, in protest at discrimination against Catholics. The house had been granted by the local council to a single nineteen-year-old Protestant woman who happened to be the secretary for a Unionist politician. The Gildernews' protest led to the organisation of civil rights marches throughout the province. It became a movement, drawing inspiration from the campaign across the water in the US. It was one of many signs of discontent before the Troubles began.

I reminded him about 'one man, one vote', too. Under Unionist rule in the 1950s and 1960s, only ratepayers and their spouses could vote in elections – owning or renting multiple properties entitled you to multiple votes. Since Unionists fared better in terms of jobs and housing, these rules favoured them.

'That was bad for my grandparents as well as yours!' he replied. 'They didn't own more than one house.'

I hadn't considered that. Catholics in 1960s Northern Ireland had had legions of grievances. They'd since been remedied but, still, that sense of resentment had

been passed down through the generations. We – their descendants – were no longer out protesting. Instead, we sat in pubs with our Protestant friends and bitched at each other about the things their 'side' had done to ours, and vice versa. It was nasty but kind of irresistible, like picking at a scab. We should have been worrying about the future, not the past. The prospect of a harder border between the North and the South, as a result of Brexit, was looming like the shadow of a TV villain. The peace we'd enjoyed for twenty years was fragile at best. Even after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, it had taken some time for the interface areas – where Protestants and Catholics lived on either side of a dividing road – to feel less like a war zone. The old tensions would return every July, when the Orange Order marched down the Crumlin Road, much to the chagrin of residents in Republican Ardoyne. Peace was an acquaintance rather than a friend. But we were alive and more likely to die by our own hands than somebody else's. I didn't know which was worse, but nor did I want to go back to those days and find out.

Even this, though – sitting in a pub, arguing with a friend from the other side of the peace wall – was an incredibly middle-class thing to do. Neither of us were born

middle-class; we grew into it. We'd both grown up in what were euphemistically called 'deprived' areas. Deprived or disadvantaged were just polite ways of saying shithole. If you lived in one of those areas and never managed to escape, it was unlikely you had friends from the other side to test your beliefs against. In recent years, youths from Ardoyne, a large Catholic area, and the nearby Protestant enclave of the Shankill had met on cross-community trips and befriended each other. They would travel back and forth on visits. It was welcome progress, but the two communities were still fundamentally segregated – living in separate areas, going to separate schools. At a grassroots level, community workers weaved miracles and brought them together. At a political level, though, there was a lack of will to do that. For the bigger parties, playing on tribal fears was still the go-to strategy for getting voters to turn up at the polling station.

So how did the conflict begin? The point is this: if you asked someone from Will's community how the war started, they would blame the IRA. The IRA had wanted a United Ireland, they'd argue, and they were determined to get it at any cost. They would bomb, kill and maim if they had to – and they'd done so, with gusto. The Unionist community only had the police and the Army to protect

them. And, some would add, terror groups like the UVF and UDA.

If, on the other hand, you asked someone from the community I was born into, you'd get a similar answer but with the roles reversed. In that version, the IRA were the protectors of the Catholic population, guarding them from all manner of evils: a mostly Protestant police force with corrupt officers; British soldiers who shot civilians on sight and rounded up young men, interning them without trial; Loyalist gunmen who roamed Catholic areas, often at night, and picked victims at random.

Which side was telling the truth? The most honest answer was that paramilitaries had killed both innocent Catholics and innocent Protestants.

The weirdest thing, though, was this: if you spoke to an IRA-supporting Republican – someone who wanted a United Ireland – they would list every injustice visited on Catholics by the Army, the police, the Loyalists and the British state. They would never mention that more Catholics had been killed by the IRA than by all those other factions put together.

UVF/UDA-supporting Unionists (known as Loyalists) would give a similar – but, again, inverted – answer. They would list every Republican atrocity, murder and injustice,

but the names of innocent Catholics who'd been slaughtered – and, in some cases, those of Protestants – would never pass their lips.

As for me, I would say that the Troubles began partly because the IRA spotted an opportunity. In the 1940s and 1950s, their armed campaigns had failed, mostly due to a lack of support from the Catholic population. By 1969, though, tensions were spilling over, with Catholics being burned out of their homes by Loyalist mobs. They heard rumours of the same mobs being assisted by the police, who were mostly Protestants themselves. The community was developing a kind of Stockholm relationship with the Provos – too afraid to stand up to them but depending on them for protection, too. And by 1972, the Parachute Regiment of the British Army had killed over two dozen innocent civilians in Belfast and Derry, in the Ballymurphy Massacre and Bloody Sunday. This had only reinforced the Catholics' fears and made them more dependent on the IRA. Decades later, Sinn Fein would claim the Provisionals' campaign had been about securing equal rights. But that was a lie. In '69, I reckoned, some of their leaders probably fancied themselves to be like the 1916 rebels and believed they could score a coup, forcing the Brits to the negotiating table. Similarly, the leaders of

the terror groups emerging from the Protestant community thought of themselves as the defenders of the province. No one – not the Brits, not the Loyalists and not the IRA – expected the Troubles to last thirty years.

The motivations of the foot soldiers who joined the groups, though, were often simpler than any of this suggests. I'd go to interview fifty-something ex-prisoners, covered in tattoos but ultimately softened by decades of three meals a day and lights out at 8 p.m., and leave with a different image: of the frightened sixteen-year-old they'd once been. When you were a working-class kid with no money and no prospects and feared people more violent than you, nothing made you feel as powerful as a weapon in your fist.

That seemed to be how the IRA and the UDA and all the other groups sucked recruits in: fear. As the war dragged on, it became about other things. Money. Sex. Greed. Power. Being senior in one of these groups came with status. Women threw themselves at you. There was the risk of prison, but if you avoided that, there was more money than you could imagine – particularly if you operated near the top of the organisation. An ex-Special Branch officer once told me how, in 1985, he'd observed a UDA brigadier and Provo leaders in a bar in Belfast city

centre – the Capstan in Ann Street. They were negotiating the carve-up of building sites. Back then, everyone from builders to shopkeepers had to pay 'protection money' to whatever group was running the area. If they didn't pay it, they couldn't work there. It still happens now, even in peacetime. The lower Newtownards Road, a Protestant area, was pocked with shuttered windows, the remnants of small businesses that couldn't afford the regular payout to the Loyalists.

So it wasn't just ideology; it never is. War was a business, and nothing proved it like collaborating with the enemy to make money. Of course, the backroom deals of the officer class wouldn't have been known to the average volunteer. Later, some of those who'd been ground-level troops in the IRA would speak out, feeling like the years they'd spent in prison had all been for nothing. They viewed the peace deal as a betrayal. What had been the purpose of it all, if the end point was going to be an armistice? Some met with their counterparts in the UVF and compared notes, trying to figure out who or what or how they'd been fucked over. Had it been the plan all along – to sell out? With hindsight, some of them believed it had.

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The story of how my generation got fucked over was a different one. We didn't sign up to a war and get sold out by a surrender. Instead, politicians, hoping to sell the peace deal to our parents, made three promises.

The first promise, they barely delivered on: peace. Loyalist paramilitaries stopped terrorising Catholic neighbourhoods; instead, they terrorised their own. The Provisional IRA and various Republican splinter groups faded away, but in their place new groups grew, with names like 'the New IRA'. Like the Loyalists, they instilled fear in poor areas like Ardoyne, which were only beginning to get over the past three decades. In the background, Unionist and Republican or Nationalist politicians continued to bicker, reopening old wounds and appealing to the sectarian fears of their voters at every election. It wasn't the peace promised, just an absence of all-out civil war. Shootings still happened, but it was no longer each side against the other; the paramilitaries were now aiming their guns inwards, towards their own communities.

The second promise was prosperity. Peace, we were assured, would bring a thriving new economy. It never appeared. It didn't matter what qualifications you had, the most plentiful work was to be found in call centres, answering or making calls for a minimum wage. They

were egalitarian shitholes; middle-class kids with PhDs mixed with kids with no GCSEs, and they all earned the same for doing the same grunt work. If you were lucky, the job didn't come with timed toilet breaks. In the end, most graduates ended up leaving. People who'd been searching for jobs for two years in Northern Ireland would find one within eight weeks in London. But it was like escaping from one trap only to walk into another; London offered jobs but it didn't offer a life. Most people I knew out there were just scraping by, paying £650 a month for a bedroom in a grotty apartment. Eventually, they'd figure out you couldn't buy a house for £100K in London the way you could in Belfast and would either return, settling for what work they could find and swapping career dreams for family life, or head further afield.

The third promise the politicians made and broke was the one that hurt the most. It was felt mostly in the areas that had already been ravaged, the ones where the gunmen continued to roam. Your children, they'd told our parents, will be safe now. With the peace deal, the days of young people disappearing and dying young would be gone.

Yet this turned out to be a lie, too.

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The shop was stacked wall-to-wall with second-hand washing machines. The counter where a shop till would normally be was a slab from a kitchen tabletop placed over a piece of wood. The decor was basic, simple, but the shop's existence in itself was an achievement.

Shaun was a working-class boy. We'd grown up in the same streets, a five-minute walk from the shop. It had once been a middle-class area, a collection of tree-lined avenues and narrow terraced houses which could still fit four bedrooms inside because they stretched out over three to four flights of stairs. That was before we were born, long enough ago to become history remembered only by the elderly neighbours. Then the Troubles had started, the posh people fled, and now the houses were occupied by everyone from criminals to those too sick to work to those too lazy to. These were not the working classes but the benefits classes. For them, the dole office was not a brief stepping stone after redundancy but a permanent fixture on the calendar – Monday morning, 9 a.m. usually. In the social pecking order, Shaun's standing had been slightly higher than the rest of us because his mother owned houses, but he still had to live among us and deal with the torture that came with living in a place without hope. When people, especially young men, had no hope,

all incentives not to wreck the place were gone, and wreck it they did. The area continued to be a battlefield long after the conflict had technically ended, devouring itself from within.

Shaun had escaped. He was a grafter. Always had been. Even back when he was a teenager, drifting through the area on his skateboard, he displayed something unique. One day, a skateshop in the city centre was making a film about local skaters and had wanted him to jump down a set of steps, flipping the board mid-air as he went. He'd screwed it up the first time. And the second. Third. Fourth. Finally, on the fifth attempt – so local lore had it – he'd nailed the move and landed, intact, at the bottom of the steps. His willingness to keep trying until he did it, while risking bone fractures or worse, had become legendary amongst the group of local outcasts who also carried boards or wore skates.

The preferred uniform of the area was tracksuit bottoms paired with a hoody. Deviating away from it meant attracting attention, and attention was never good here, only bad. Somehow, though, Shaun had managed to straddle both worlds, drinking with the hoods, then befriending the minority of nerds and skaters who skulked around the streets trying to see round corners, hoping not to be

noticed. Apart from the cops, who I once saw roll down their windows and call out taunts about his size, no one had a bad word to say about Shaun. Across the road was the Waterworks. It was a North Belfast landmark, iconic both because of its size and the fact that the Germans had bombed it in the Second World War, yet here it still stood. It was a park that stretched from a dirty, man-made, polluted pond on the lower ground up a hill to a lake with silky blue waters that lapped a stone shore. It was the bane of Shaun's life. Drug dealers would hang around its perimeter, flogging their wares in full view of the busy main road and passing police cars. It would send him hurtling into a rage. One day, he'd hopped on his motorbike – it was a beast of a machine and he was barely five foot four, but he was athletic enough to command it – and chased them up the road. They were bad for business, but I had a feeling his anger had little to do with money. When he was around sixteen, he'd walked into a derelict house that had stood near the corner of Manor Street, a regular haunt for teens in the district because of the corner shop, which sold cigarettes in singles. He'd begun climbing the stairs.

Why had he been there? What had he been looking for? It wasn't clear, but Shaun's intuition was usually solid and I imagined it was a nagging, that something's-not-right

feeling anyone who'd grown up with the violence of the streets seemed to possess. At the top of the stairs, he'd wandered into a room. There, suspended from the rafters by a piece of rope, had been the body of his best friend. He'd cut the boy down, presumably begun making the phone calls that needed to be made. Fifteen years later, he could still picture the scene in his head, describe what had happened that night as if it was a movie he'd just seen in the cinema. Many had died the same way since, and we'd known them or known of them. The incident hadn't ruined his life, but when he saw dealers, the kind of people who did ruin the lives of the young, kids who'd been the same age as his best friend when he'd died or younger, he flew into a rage, the kind of rage where you'd do something reckless like take off in pursuit of a group of criminals because you know the cops had no interest in arresting them.

It was what I loved about Shaun. He cared.