For most people, childhood is a collection of sweet memories you think back to when everything around turns into crap. But then, most people don’t grow up in West Belfast. Childhood is somewhat different here. It phases out in instalments, as it were. As a five-year-old, everything seems too dreadful to be real. At sixish, the tables are turned: it is anything ‘normal’ that seems unreal. By the time you turn seven, however, everyday-life gets exciting enough: there is no need to make up war stories, and having the barricades so very much at hand feels just grand. Then, at some point before eight, something happens and, suddenly, you realise how fucking sick you are of a pigheaded game you can, no matter what, never win. Reached this stage... Congratulations lad; childhood is over!

Then they burned us out.

The five of us were in bed. After the factory fire, we all sleep upstairs -together. A few nights before, a crowd of Special Constables came up Crumlin Road shooting at rioters, and a factory nearby was set on fire. I heard guns. I was very scared. They were shooting guns. This was at night. I couldn’t sleep and I was afraid they would stick the guns in the window, like, and shoot Niall or Connor. They were sleeping downstairs. Now Niamh and I can’t sleep at night. So we are allowed to sleep with Una and Orla and Siobhán.

We were in bed. I was lying nearest the window so as Niamh wouldn’t get hit by a bullet. Niamh is my twin sister, you know? A store close to my window was burning. They were lighting matches and breaking windows, like, and I thought the whole world was burning.

Mum had sent us upstairs. But she never pulled the blind down. I couldn’t sleep. Niamh neither. She sat at the window and stared out as if paralysed. I climbed up out at our window as well. I saw them Prods. They were coming at us. They were coming down Bombay Street. And shooting machine-guns. Then I saw the crowds coming up the street.

‘They are beating up the children; they are going to shoot them’, whimpered the small boy -your pallid one with dark rings round his eyes. You know whom I mean? I can’t remember his name because ‘twas five of them, and they came in last night. Ide, I remember. But I can’t recall the others by name -I was too tired to listen. Niall explained how Mum and Father had put ‘m up so as they wouldn’t see more combatants spilling into their front garden. But I was too tired to listen. The noi-
Down On Our Luck

I heard the guns. Then those men ran away and the Army attacked our street. The Army are even worse than the police or the Prods; they think they’re tough. They rough up people for just looking at ‘em, like. And they’re so unfair. They only search Catholic houses. Never the others. They arrested my uncle once. He died of a heart attack later, lifting concrete blocks to make a barricade.

I heard the guns. The specials were shooting at us. I saw a man covered in blood. At first I freaked. But I never let on. I prayed ‘Don’t let him be Father’. But I never spoke up. It wasn’t my father. It was Ide’s. But she never said nothing neither. She saw it and all.

I felt sick. And shooked all over. And came out in a sweat. Then, I started to wheeze, like. And, then, I couldn’t breathe.

I can’t remember anymore. Sometimes, ya know, there are things I can’t remember.

I got Niamh to tell me what happened next.

She said you could see the bullet holes, and how awful it was. They were burning people up. ‘I saw a man’ she started. Then she failed. Her fists clenched. ‘No thing. Then, she pulled herself together, ‘his stomach was hanging out. They put a hanky to his tummy to try and stop the blood. I just…’ here, she foundered couldn’t breathe.

She had a heart-attack. She couldn’t breathe.

I’m frightened. And very tired, too, because, ya know? I can’t sleep at night.

Father says there’s nothing to worry about; I’m not the only one who’s scared.

‘Not the only one you said?’ Connor spat out. ‘The kid’s not your fucking only one. Grand then?’ Is that what you said? Well! Get knotted then, ‘cos ‘til your Protestant bastards don’t fucking get their fucking butt outa here… augh! Fuck it!’

In between ‘here’ and ‘augh!’ Mum had broken down and gone into a fit –you know, crying and all. She went and asked God what she’d done wrong to be punished so –for she must’ve done something wrong, if her children couldn’t stop swearing.

She harped on. Then, since God didn’t answer, she took it all out on Father. I suspected it as much. ‘I can’t believe you let’m put upon us like that all the time’. Then, she let God know how disappointed she was at her husband –this is Father. Mum calls him ‘her husband’, like, you know? - for not having took us all away.

God couldn’t be bothered. Neither could Father. I feel very sad when they argue. And guilty, too.

I’ll try more harder to not be so edgy. So as they won’t argue.

I’ll try and do my damnedest to be no trouble.

1970

I’m very sorry she felt like that. God love’e, she’s very good. She causes no trouble. I do. I know. But I can’t help it, like.

Every time I hear a loud noise I shake all over. I think about fires and burning and have to keep getting up to look out of the window. Any loud noise makes me cry and shudder.

Today in school we had our Sound Book –you know, about the different sounds things make. ‘What goes ting-a-ling?’ the Miss asked. I thought of the fire engine and felt my hands shaking. Then I woke up on the floor. I can’t remember nothing more. Sometimes, I can’t remember things you know?

Mum’s upset. Only upset, not mad or anything. Connor’s mad. Not upset or anything, only mad. I’m frightened. And very tired, too, because, ya know? I can’t sleep at night.

Father says there’s nothing to worry about; I’m not the only one who’s scared.

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1971

Declan, your boy there in the green anorak scrounged for my pencil. Then he carefully drew two straight lines on the back of the envelope. ‘That’s the street, right?’ He added a neat row of dots outside each line, then a rectangle in the middle. ‘These are the lamp-posts, and that’s the Army Land Rover coming up the street, like. You tie your cheese-wire between two of the lampposts, about six feet up. There’s always a soldier standing on the back of the jeep; even with search-lights, he can’t see the wire in the dark. It’s right at the right height to catch his throat. Then, when the jeep stops, we can come out and throw stones’.

Éilís, his two-year-older sister, disagreed. ‘Only kids throw stones. What we are to do is fill our pockets with’m and carry hurley-sticks. Aoife said that if you put a stone down on the ground and swing the stick as hard as you can, you could hit a soldier below his shield and cripple him. We once cut a squad of thirty-six down to six in ten minutes like that’.

Feilim, your third boy in the think-tank, supported her. ‘Then’, he shivered, bagging down with daring, ‘then, we come in with the petrol-bombs. If a soldier lowers his shield to protect himself against the stones, you can lob a bomb over the top and get him that way’.

I pointed out that they’d put wire-breakers on the front of all Army vehicles. One passed as I spoke, but none of the three troubled to glance at it. ‘We know all about that,’ Declan grumbled contemptuously. ‘Look.’ He drew again. ‘One each side, you carry the ends of the wire along the pavement to two more lampposts. If you didn’t do that, the first two posts would simply be pulled out. And we use a double-thickness of wire. The wire-breaker can’t really snap it –so if you don’t get the fellow on the back you can at least stop the jeep. It’s a sitting target for the others then’.

‘How many others?’ Niamh asked apprehensively. He
shrugged. ‘As many as we can get. Not the kids, of course. Them we give the bin-lids. Their job is to stand at all the corners and bang the lids when they see British soldiers coming’.

‘Not your job?’ I ventured. He gave me a withering look. ‘I’m nearly nine,’ he said icily.

The first time, you feel fear; your senses sharpen. A shot of hormones flood into your bloodstream, causing you to breathe deeply, making your heart rate soar. Your muscles tense in anticipation.

‘If you screw it up, we’re done for’.
‘Damned if I don’t know that’.
‘So, go over it again and again in your head tonight. Tomorrow’ll be too late’.

Divis Street must be the most depressing thoroughfare in Europe. There are no windows –as the term is generally understood- only bricked-up or boarded-up rectangles. Just at rare points, the Sappers have overlooked a gaping hole, and filthy curtains are still visible between jagged edges. The only vegetation grows in thick tufts from senile chimney pots, and the only water is running out from below a door, evil-smelling effluvium from a damaged sewer-pipe. It has been flowing for so long that the pavement around is green and slippery. The wind has piled litter into bizarre snowdrifts, and, at a deserted bookie’s, the burglar alarm has been ringing unheeded all morning. Nearby a shop is on fire; tall flames are flowing upwards into a low pall of smoke. There are no police or firemen; nobody pays any attention.

Further up, at the main intersection, the traffic lights are broken again, felled like trees to support last night’s barricades. In the middle, standing on the remains of a burnt-out lorry, four older boys all around the age of ten are directing the traffic with stern efficiency. One of them notices me gazing, grimaces at the others, and slobs his way towards where I’m standing. In a wince of spite, he manages to mumble that ‘it’s nonsense that only two soldiers kicked the bucket last night. We saw six lying dead on Grosvenor Road. They had been lying on their stomachs, shooting, until we threw one of the nail-bombs over and they blew up. We know they were dead ‘cos I turned one over and his eyes were kind a staring up at the sky’

He then looks down a couple of times, as if fumbling for something.

It takes him a while to look me in the eye. ‘We’ll all go to Milltown Cemetery tomorrow if that’s OK with you... We’re all too sorry Niamh got killed’