

John In the Rain

BY GARY HUNTER

Maybe it was the rain that brought him back to me, years later and a lifetime away. I sat staring out the window at a drowned, green and red-brick world. A steady deluge pummelled remnants of garden flowers flat and pathetic. Heavy rain beat a tattoo on the window. An empty bird feeder hung from a bent, dripping branch. I remembered John.

John and I were primary school classmates and lived near each other in North Belfast. We loved the Beatles, the Man from Uncle and spaceships.

John was clumsy, awkward, the class fool, talking to his pencil, drinking ink, clowning. Desperate to make people laugh, he was often in trouble. He was punished, sent to the principal's office, made to stand in the corridor outside the classroom, caned and battered and belittled. But John kept smiling his big, stupid smile.

During endless, summer days, we'd get nets on bamboo poles from the Academy shop and fish for spricks in the little river that ran through Alexandra Park. Sometimes we stayed until the wee crippled parkie we called Spastic Jim came to chase us out and lock the gates.

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One day John and me were playing commandos on the first floor of our flats. I kicked over three empty milk bottles that old Mrs De Courcy always placed on the mat outside her door. I watched the slow-motion explosion, shards of light, sparkling silver, raining over the balcony onto the concrete below. Doors opening, footsteps and raised voices getting closer. Mrs De Courcy flew out at us, snarling, all skin and bone swathed in a pink housecoat, face powder and ropey blue veins, smoke-stained fingers stretching out to catch me. 'I'm tellin' your da when he gets back,' she hissed.

I decided to run away from home. John promised he'd run away too. He ran back to his flat and returned with crisps, Penguin biscuits and a carton of orange in his ma's net shopping bag.

They'd look for us in the park, maybe at the swings in the waterworks. We wandered the length of the Limestone Road. I told John stories of witches; oul dolls dressed in black, living alone, houses dark and blinds drawn, dreaming of the tender, smoking flesh of roasted runaway children. I scared myself and wished I'd kept my mouth shut. It would be dark soon.

Streetlights sparked on so we gave up and skulked back towards home. As we turned the corner on to the Antrim Road, we met my father, stalking along, head thrust out, staring straight ahead. He saw us and shouted for us to stop, he wasn't cross, he said. I cried, expecting a beating or at least a telling-off but he took us to Rossi's for ice cream. Nobody came looking for John, so we walked him home. When we got back to the flats, I noticed that the broken glass had been swept away. Mrs DeCourcy's door was closed but she was inside, listening to Matt Monro sing Walk Away.

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On a dark, dreary October day, as the year began its steady descent into winter, John and I were playing round the back of the flats. We hurled stones at dusty grey rats that squeaked and rummaged at the bottom of rubbish chutes. Rain fell hard and lights in the rear windows of the houses opposite were on. Near a dented bin, an old dog nosed through a pile of sodden papers. Rainwater gurgled from a broken drainpipe. Basil, the Indian medical student, smothered under a slick yellow oilskin, sped past on his bike and waved at us.

We decided to go home. John left first. I watched him run off, jumping across oily, rainbow-hued puddles. As I stood alone in the gathering gloom, the world fell silent. I felt an emptiness, a sense of loss, strong as a hard punch to my gut. Somehow, I knew that this was the way things would always be: people ran away and left you standing in the rain all alone. Rain would fall and wash everything away, but you'd remember where people stood and what they said before they vanished.

John and I remained friends until we went to different secondary schools. I moved to a new three-bedroom house across town. We saw each other infrequently, then not at all.

Years later, I was working for a local newspaper. I was sitting in the editorial library, studying a file on North Belfast shootings for an article on peace walls. I pulled out a brittle, bone-yellow news clipping from 1975. The piece described a shooting in a bar in York Street. The victim was John Fulton, nineteen, from Tiger's Bay. I held the paper close, studied the grainy picture. Even with his hair grown long and no glasses, I recognised the sad smile on the open face of my friend John. He'd been shot in retaliation for a murder he'd committed a days earlier. He'd killed a man.

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The hit was unsanctioned, so John had to go. He'd been shot in the face. Police sources claimed the killings were part of an internecine paramilitary feud. One more statistic. Long ago and worlds away. But sometimes, when it rains and the days die down, I can hear John's voice and see his face. He's in the Waterworks and he can't see because it's dark. He's lost his glasses and he's so scared. His thin arms are stretched out in front of him and he's afraid of falling.

I'm haunted by those same feelings of loss and loneliness and futility. I think about John and all the lost children, running blind into the distance, thin wreaths of smoke swallowed up by an immense darkness, unable to ever find their way back home again.

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