

## That Summer

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That summer, I was sure someone would die. It wasn't a premonition since I couldn't predict who or when, more a hunch. Ivan reckoned too much sun had gone to my head, like those fellas in the films, hallucinating in the Sahara Desert. There was a steamy haze when you looked into the distance all right, but no mirages. Tar melted on the roads and stuck to the soles of our flip-flops. Ivan suggested putting them on our hands to climb walls, like human geckos.

"What's a gecko?" I asked.

He'd already turned away. I watched him make his tacky-footed<sup>1</sup> way home. His Da didn't tolerate tardiness and Ivan had felt the sting of a belt on his backside more than once. I wished he could stay until teatime when the mothers started bellowing names, rounding us up like stray sheep, but he never did.

I yelled "Fatso!" into the air in Ivan's general direction, but only because Noel Conway was strutting towards me like he owned the estate. I hoped Ivan hadn't heard. All I could see of him now were his head and shoulders off down the hill towards the real town where the shops, the bars, and the seven different churches were.

"Wanna see something?" Noel asked.

I straightened up, thrust my hands into the shallow pockets of my shorts, not quite squaring up to Noel's bulky frame, but I'd held my own<sup>2</sup> in a scuffle with him once, and he'd never forgotten.

"See what?"

"Mrs Walsh topless."

The Walshes were the only Catholic family in our red, white and blue North Down stronghold<sup>3</sup>. There'd been no violence against them, although the possibility always hovered in the air. To most people, they were a curiosity, re-housed for their own safety. To others, an annoying itch, demanding the occasional scratch in the form of a low-level taunt. But to some, they were an alien presence who needed reminding of their outsider status. Cuckoos, to be kicked out of our cozy Protestant nest.

We cut around the back of the terrace, crouching so the old-aged pensioners in their bungalows wouldn't spot us. I could hear Mrs Snow clattering about in her scullery, her voice robust if a bit dodgy on the high notes of Shirley Bassey's "Goldfinger"<sup>4</sup>. When he kissed her, it's the kiss of death...

The Walshes' house was the end one, the biggest in the row. It had four bedrooms and fancy wood panelling under the picture window at the front. Mr Walsh had created privacy at the back with a slatted wooden fence, and a piece of hardboard hammered over the chicken wire on the gate. But Noel knew what he was doing. A knot in one of the planks had fallen out, or been poked out, and by hunkering down, we got an eyeful of Mrs Walsh sunbathing.

It was late afternoon, yet the sun's infernal rays felt like hundreds of hot pinpricks on the back of my neck. Noel stepped back and it was my turn. I recognized the cloying scent of the coconut sun oil my sisters used, but Mrs Walsh's body looked nothing like theirs, all curves instead of angles. She was lying on her stomach, reading a book, breasts unrestrained by the abandoned bikini top on the grass.

I decided to count to twenty and pack it in, but when I reached sixteen, Mrs Walsh rolled onto her side and sat up. She re-did her ponytail, sweeping wavy locks of auburn hair off her forehead and temples with long, scarlet nails. She reached for the bikini top, fastened it, and headed indoors. I stood up, stretched my arms and shoulders, feigning indifference.

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<sup>1</sup> his feet sticking to the wet tar

<sup>2</sup> *held my own*: been strong

<sup>3</sup> *red, white and blue North Down stronghold*: Protestant community, Northern Ireland

<sup>4</sup> the title song for the 1964 James Bond movie, sung by British singer Shirley Bassey (b. 1937)

45 “Well, wee man?” Noel grinned, showing the gap where Roland Hill had knocked out his tooth on the last day of school. Noel had been asking for it, taunting Roland, saying the weirdo in Old Hughie’s Wood was his ma in the wedding dress she never wore because his da flitted<sup>5</sup>. Mrs Hill wore too much make-up, had mice in her bee-hive<sup>6</sup>, and idolized Marilyn Monroe<sup>7</sup>, but Ivan and I had a different theory on the weirdo. It was a man, escaped from the asylum, in women’s clothes and a wig. “Well?” whispered Noel again. “Whatcha’ think? Double D<sup>8</sup>?”

50 I hadn’t a clue what he meant. Thankfully, I was saved by the horn. The three peeps of the water lorry that regulated our days like the knocking-off siren at the carpet factory, where our fathers worked. Except Mr Walsh. Nobody knew what he did, despite much speculation.

“My Ma’ll kill me if I don’t get the water,” I said. And scooted off for the plastic containers every household relied on during the drought.

55 That summer, Kim McCaig and Phillip Davidson went missing near the end of the school holidays. [...]

The day they disappeared, nobody panicked at first. Kids often wandered off, later found in some old lady’s flat, tucking into ice-cream or stroking her cat. But when half an hour stretched to an hour and then some more, the two mothers lost it, went banging on doors and running down alleys. They sent us all searching. Ivan, Noel, Roland, and I went to the woods. Noel predicted Kim and Phillip were face down in the stream, drowned by the weirdo.

60 “They’re maybe just kidnapped,” I said.

My guts lurched. This was it. Someone had to die that summer. Our search was haphazard and we found nothing. Back at the estate, two RUC<sup>9</sup> men in bulletproof vests, revolvers holstered to their belts, were questioning people.

65 Phillip’s ma was wailing, “Oh, my God, Oh, my God.” She’d been the calmest earlier, but her fears had simmered, eventually boiling over as time made its slow, cruel progress. Kim’s ma kept repeating the same thing to the knot of figures in the shade of her front garden, the only one with a decent tree. “She’s only three and he’s only four.”

70 Mrs Walsh was at the edge of the group. She was beautiful up close, more sophisticated than the small-town mothers. Unlike them, she knew exactly how to look in an emergency. Probably had loads of practice in Belfast<sup>10</sup> where the Troubles<sup>11</sup> were. Phillip’s ma cracked, screeched, and made to run towards the town. It was Mrs Walsh who stopped her, a protective arm around shoulders slumped like a defeated boxer’s. Two heavy sobs from the pit of her stomach and Phillip’s ma looked up into Mrs Walsh’s face. There was a moment of recognition and confusion before she attempted to withdraw. She seemed on the brink of saying something terrible when someone yelled, “Look!”

75 They ambled round the end of the terrace, hands clasped as ever, grins from ear to ear, sunlight bouncing off wispy blond hair. Kim and Phillip were back and they were completely naked. Unlike the scorching sun, time showed some mercy and froze. The air was heavy and oppressive, muffling every sound. Something metallic hit the concrete pavement. Mrs Walsh’s chain belt, loosened from her mini dress as Phillip’s ma had extracted herself from the unwelcome embrace. The two mothers  
80 ran to their children, enfolding them in bear hugs that looked unbreakable. All eyes stayed on them except mine. Mrs Walsh strode back to her house, chin unconvincingly up, and I picked up the chain that glistened like real gold. It was warm in my palm and I imagined my hand on Mrs Walsh’s bare breast, her skin warm too, but soft and comforting. I pocketed my booty.

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<sup>5</sup> (here) escaped

<sup>6</sup> hair piled up

<sup>7</sup> *Marilyn Monroe*: American actress, model and singer (1926-1962)

<sup>8</sup> *Double D*: size of her bra

<sup>9</sup> *Royal Ulster Constabulary*: the police force in Northern Ireland

<sup>10</sup> the capital of Northern Ireland

<sup>11</sup> *the Troubles*: the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland

85 That summer, missing kids came home after sneaking down to the sweetshop for a gobstopper<sup>12</sup>,  
or walking with pals for miles to see their granny's grave. That summer, we ran free and someone  
was always at home. Mothers didn't work, and didn't know the perils of putting tinned meat in  
stodgy, white bread sandwiches every day. That summer, no-one wore seatbelts.

90 Mrs Walsh was killed the same weekend Phillip and Kim turned up naked with no explanation,  
just giggles and shrugs. The gossipers said her husband got drunk on his birthday and gave her the  
car keys, though she'd only had a few driving lessons. She took the bend near the school too quickly  
and slammed into an oak tree in Old Hughie's Wood. Her husband survived but Mrs Walsh went  
through the windscreen.

95 They took her body back to Belfast for the funeral and next day her relatives came to clear out  
the house. I sat on our garden wall, waiting for something I'd recognize as hers to appear. Everything  
except the furniture was boxed up. When her brothers carried a white dressing table to the van, I  
saw her in the mirror, brushing her hair, squirting Chanel perfume behind each ear, and laughing,  
like she hadn't a care in the world.

100 I reached inside my pocket and pulled out the chain belt. Thirty-three links, the same number of  
years she'd lived, like Jesus. Over at the Davidsons' house, two slats on the Venetian blind parted,  
but only briefly. No-one came out of there or any other house. I held the chain at one end and  
twirled it round on top of the wall, making circle upon circle and slowly unravelling it again. A door  
slammed somewhere. I thought one of the women would appear to say some kind words to Mrs  
Walsh's family, bring them a tray with tall glasses of lemonade, the chink of ice cubes breaking the  
terrible, heat-hazed silence. But no.

105 The van's engine choked into action and the last man emerged from the front door at the  
Walshes'. He paused at the bottom of the path and looked up at the bedroom windows. Without the  
curtains, I could make out Teddy Bear wallpaper in one room and purple painted walls in the other. I  
didn't know anyone who'd ever gone in to play with the Walsh children. I wished I had.

110 Mrs Walsh's brother struggled to fasten the front gate. I slipped off the wall and ran towards him.  
He nearly knocked me over as he swung around.

"Hiya," he said. "Are you a friend of Martin's?"

"Not really," I said. "I found this. It's Mrs Walsh's."

115 I dropped the gold chain into his big, calloused hand. It looked smaller, insignificant there. He  
paused, frowned. Maybe, when I said her name, it brought her back to life. Maybe, for a minute, he  
forgot the accident, imagined his sister just moving house, or emigrating to Canada or somewhere.

"Ah, I tell ya' what, you keep it. As a memento, like."

He closed his hand around the chain as if he was changing his mind. He shut his eyes for a second,  
then cupped my hand and gave it back.

"Thanks," I said, relieved.

120 He joined the others in the van, waved as they drove off. I saluted him, the only send-off for the  
Walshes. Grasping the chain tightly in my sweaty palm, I set off for Old Hughie's Wood to meet Ivan.  
He'd be waiting for me. It was that summer. There were trees to climb, a stream to jump, and hours  
to go before teatime.

(2015)

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<sup>12</sup> a large piece of candy