

# TERRORIST TO EVANGELIST

*The True Story of Cornelius Kenneth McClinton*

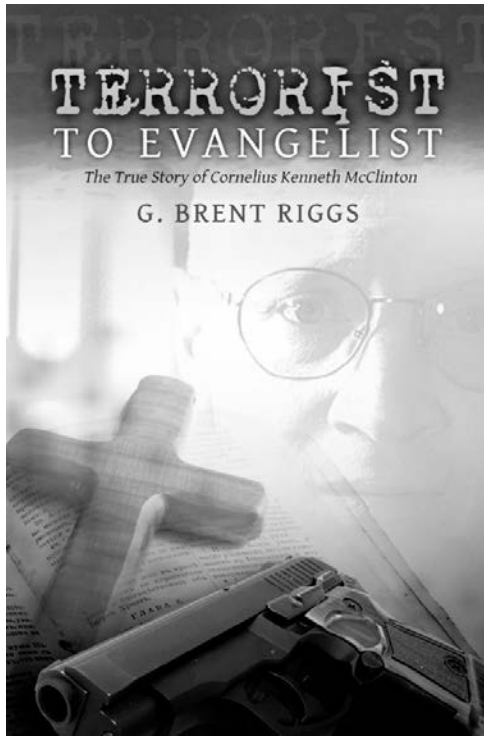
G. BRENT RIGGS



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The True Story of Cornelius Kenneth McClinton

By G. Brent Riggs



# Acknowledgments

Thank you to my wife and children, who put up with me and my constant writing projects. Without the joy they give me, the writing wouldn't be worth doing at all.

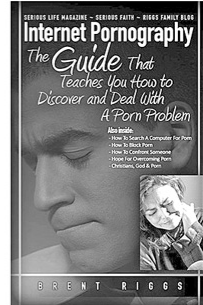
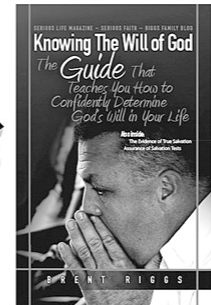
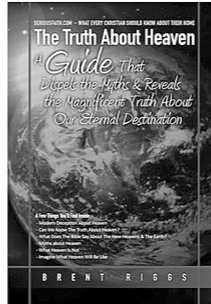
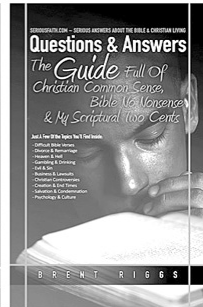
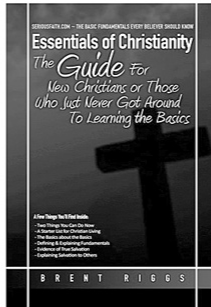
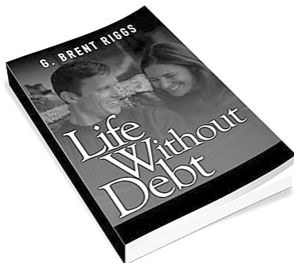
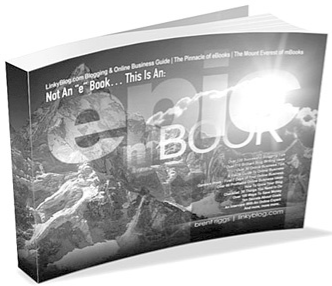
Thanks to everyone who previewed any number of chapters and encouraged me to continue writing the story.

A special thank you to my mom and dad, my father-in-law and my family, who continue to encourage me to write.

Most of all, thank you to Ken McClinton, who tirelessly penned his sometimes very difficult memories so that I could communicate them in my own style to the Westerners on this side of the pond. I gave a few years to write this. Ken gave his whole life to create the story.

Kenny and I both thank God and his Son, Jesus Christ, who can take any life and any history and transform it into one fit for the kingdom.

A few of Brent's other books... to see a full list visit:  
[www.brenttriggs.com/stuff](http://www.brenttriggs.com/stuff)





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## Prologue

On September 11 of 2001, terrorism came to the land of the free. What had only been a news segment up to this point in America was now real life. What had only happened in other countries was now happening in ours.



With the deliberate crash of planes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon—American symbols of finance and military might—terrorism entered the American mainstream culture, and from all appearances, it doesn't look like it's going anywhere.

Kenny McClinton didn't learn about terrorism on 9/11. Long before that infamous day, he had already lived and survived a life as a terrorist fighting other terrorists and terrifying innocent civilians.

Many authors have written about the man prison guards called "The Maniac," but none have told the full story. This first installment of Ken's story presents the ex-terrorist's life from his own memories and perspective, from his childhood to his conversion all alone in prison—traversing adventures that are almost too wild to believe.

Born into abject poverty in lower-working class Belfast, Ireland, Kenny McClinton became as hardcore as the life he was forced to live. From a violent, drunken father to abusive boy's homes, from the navy to a sadistic prison, from terrorism to salvation—this is Ken's remarkable and gut-wrenching story of how the Lord rescued him from a life not worth living.

Kenny had made contact with me through my daily Bible devotional ministry, and our friendship took flight on the wings of scriptural conversation. When he started sending me some of his own Bible teachings, I sensed something intriguing under the surface. Somewhere along the way, I made a request of my new friend: “Tell me about your life...”

After hearing his story and experiencing the response of my own readers to his testimony (I had included it in one of my messages), it became abundantly clear to me that I wanted to tell the world about how God can change a terrorist—yes, a real-life terrorist—into an evangelist who spreads life instead of death.

Kenny’s story vividly testifies that God can use any person—no matter who or where they came from. Abuse, trauma, broken homes, violence, war, politics, and hate—it’s a story of God’s unbelievable mercy and providence, a story of hope for the hopeless, a story of love where love did not exist.

No matter what you face today, no matter what you’ve done, no matter how lost you are, there is hope for you. Kenny is living proof of that.

Here is the story of Kenny McClinton, former terrorist, now an evangelist. Once spreading death, now spreading life. Once born to lose, now born again...

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brent". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping "B" and a trailing flourish.

*Note: The poems throughout the book were authored by Ken McClinton.*

**Ghetto Offspring**

Hark! The ghetto wind is blowing,  
Moaning, midst the hovels heaped.  
    Nine months long,  
        the seed's been growing;  
Warm the womb within he sleeps.  
    All too soon his peace is broken,  
    Slumbering for the embryo ends.  
    Slapped on bottom as a token,  
    Of the future pain life sends.  
Harsh! The first deep draught of winter,  
March, the lion, breathed bravely in.  
Anger floods the newborn youngster  
    At a world so steeped in sin.  
    Who hears the howling,  
        hungry, homeless?  
Who cares or wonders 'bout the waif?  
    Society sits deaf and grumbles,  
    Feigning mercy, love, and faith!  
Cold hard hearts, the child encounters;  
    Seeds of hatred soon are sown.  
Midst this mire of doomed defaulters,  
    The ghetto child grows grim alone.

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton, 1983



# This Is It

March 24, 1983: *McClinton*, I thought to myself, *this is it. You're about to die.*

I had known for quite some time that it was coming. I was keenly sensitive to the inevitable conclusion of being a man marked for death.

Walking into the break room of the prison, all of my senses went on red alert, sounding the alarm that things were not right. The first thing I noticed was the steam floating across the ceiling. The inmate in charge of boiling water had heated gallons and gallons of water to an angry, rolling boil—far more and far hotter than necessary for making tea.

The two prison guards who had been assigned to protect me were nowhere to be found. I was now alone and unprotected in a room of convicted murderers and terrorists. I felt strangely calm in the face of such imminent danger. Having become a Christian four years earlier while in solitary confinement, it was not my nature now to be the initiator of violence, even though I knew it was coming. I simply took my mug of tea and sat down like usual at the table.

Four convicted IRA terrorists slowly moved to block any escape through the entrance or exit. Each of them was carrying a large redwood plank that looked like a square baseball bat. The ashen color of their faces betrayed their fear and nervousness.

I reached for the little Gideon's New Testament that I carried in my shirt pocket, but my hand never made it. I felt the heat before the boiling water actually touched my skin. In an instant, gallons of scalding liquid were being poured on my head and back. My first sensation was of the soft skin behind and around my left ear instantly



bubbling up and disintegrating. Within a couple of seconds, a large portion of my body had been scalded and burned severely.

It seems strange now, but at the time, I felt no immediate pain. With calm resolve, I stood up and removed the reading glasses from my eyes. I couldn't see well, because the boiling water had run over my face, but I sensed the danger coming in front of me.

*Thud!* A hammer from the workshop, wielded in cowardly fashion, struck me on the high right-hand side of my face between my temple and jawbone, quickly opening a profusely bleeding wound.

My natural survival instincts kicked in as I backed into a corner, shaking my head and wiping the water and blood from my eyes. I had not uttered a sound up to this point but knew that I was very badly injured by the boiling water and the blow to my head. The first thing I saw after clearing my eyes was a terrorist-prisoner I knew by the name of Becker. He was making his way toward me, holding one of the three-by-three, baseball bat-like sticks, his eyes already focused on where he was going to deliver the *coup de grâce*. In my heightened state of shock and adrenaline, I took the initiative and lunged straight for him, taking the first swing of the bat into the outside of my left bicep. *Whack!* He really nailed me, and the pain was excruciating, but I had successfully fended off an otherwise fatal blow. I ducked the next swing, grabbed the surprised Becker by the ankles, and with strength that was beyond normal circumstances, I picked him up and tossed him over onto my badly burned back.

With Becker flopped over my shoulders and my head actually between his legs, I was somewhat protected from the next round of hammer blows, baseball bat swings, and punches that were now coming from the other attackers. Like a movie scene, everything seemed to happen in slow motion, and twenty-two years later, I still remember it all in half speed.

One of the terrorists, a young guy whom I didn't know, had slipped on the water that spilled on the floor and was now attempting to get a grip around my ankles to hold me for the others who would finish me off. Four others, armed with the bats, were still blocking the door and any attempt to escape. I charged them, holding Becker upside down on my back, and threw him off me and on top of them. The combined force of our two bodies sent the door guards stumbling

backward against the wall and into the corner, like bowling pins being scattered.

That bought me an instant of opportunity to dive through the doorway and onto the steps toward the safety of being out in the open where others could see me. Landing facedown on the stairs, I thought I had succeeded in escaping when suddenly the door was slammed shut on my foot, trapping me. I felt the hands of the terrorists grabbing my ankle and holding me fast so that I could not get free. The door opened, and to my horror, another bucket full of boiling water was dumped on my already-blistered and burned body. Almost my entire upper torso now bubbled and broiled in the intense heat. The skin just simply melted away in a matter of seconds.

I kicked my free foot with all the strength I could summon, and suddenly my other foot was unexpectedly released. The door slammed shut. I was left there as good as dead. The pain rushed over me in waves and consumed every nerve in my body with intense fire.

I was still alive. In the coming days, I would wish that I wasn't.

## Beginnings

March in Belfast is the time of fierce winds rushing down from the Antrim-Plateau<sup>1</sup>, making their way along the working-class streets, and whistling through the red brick houses of Ireland.

Blowing past the Jubilee Hospital, the March lion took little notice of a certain baby's birth, its pathetic cry no match for the orchestral howl of nature. I came into the world with a distinct chilling insecurity and uncertainty that would permeate my subconscious, even from the tender years of my early life.

I am Cornelius Kenneth McClinton, an Irishman, an Ulsterman<sup>2</sup>.

I was born the second son of a poor, working-class family. My father was a hard man who made his living driving a horse-drawn wagon and trailer for one of the many Belfast hauler companies that existed throughout industrial Ulster in 1947.

My childhood memories are saturated with the feelings of horror that naturally come with extreme domestic violence. My father spent his nonworking hours visiting the dingy bars in Belfast to "wash away the coal dust." One drink might be enough to clear the day's dust from his throat, but it would take many more each night to wash away the hopelessness of such a dreary existence.

He was a good worker by all accounts, putting in his time diligently and always ready to lend a helping hand to a fellow driver. That made him popular with the management of whichever company he happened to be working for at the time and with the other men who shared the same lot in life.

Ironically, it was this popularity that was the source of problems for my dad, known as “Big Davy” to his friends. Dad spent his wages and his time on his buddies. This created an ever-present group of so-called friends—the kind that always seems to tag along after someone who is both generous and insecure.

While Dad spent all of his time buying friendship, Mom would spend all of her time trying to cope with the inevitable consequences of this lifestyle made worse by Dad’s growing love for the bottle. Mother would fly into a rage when Big Davy would eventually stumble home absent the income we desperately needed to survive.

Open domestic warfare would follow his arrival, with my mother venting all her formidable verbal fury on him. The fight would inevitably turn physical, with Mom splitting open Dad’s head with a brass-knobbed poker, for which he would kindly repay her with impressive black eyes and busted lips. She would eventually be overpowered by sheer strength of the bear-sized man, and when that night’s fierce encounter was over, we children were left to process the emotional price of witnessing this ceaseless and extreme chaos.

One of my earliest memories is of my poor mother escorting my brother and me on tours of the local taverns and hangouts of the Old Lodge and Shankill Road areas of Belfast. We would diligently search for my father, hoping desperately to find him before he drank away our food and rent!

I recall one particular night that eventually resulted in locating our bear in his den of iniquity. Mom got more than she bargained for by daring to take the fight directly to his stomping ground.

We had spent the evening, with no success, searching for Dad in the many possible places he might be holing up. We were engaged in our usual routine of asking male passersby to stick their head into a tavern and inquire about the presence of Big Davy (wives were most unwelcome in these establishments, a fact which was about to become very real).

Mom had proceeded to lead my older brother and me up a side street in the direction of the next of my father’s favorite drinking haunts. After striking out yet again, we were just about to move on, and suddenly my mother stopped dead in her tracks. She looked up toward a familiar sound that was coming from a lounge on the second

floor accessible only through the entrance of a stairway just in front of us.

Dad's uplifted, drunken singing had betrayed his whereabouts, and my mother's face seemed to turn from white to raging red before I had even come to the realization of exactly what she had heard.

Up the stairs she bounded, the decent hardworking mother with her young children, invading the forbidden territory of drinking men and their wanton women. Dad was still blissfully engaged in his intoxicated musical production when Mom forcefully barged in, much to the visible shock of the other patrons. There was Big Davy, his cap gripped tightly in his calloused working-class hand, face grimed black by the coal dust from his wagonload that day, singing his alley-cat serenade to an attentive audience of like-minded drinkers.

A deathly quiet ushered in our presence. In those days, a decent wife and mother would *never* be seen in such a place of disgrace, and my father's eyes frantically surveyed the scene, trying to discover who or what dared to interrupt the melodious interlude that now found itself strangled in his throat.

His bloodshot eyes finally came to a bleary focus on his wife and two young boys. You would have thought that the sight of his precious family would first create in him a sense of concern, or at least curiousness, at what possibly could have brought his wife to violate such a well-understood ordinance of spousal etiquette; you would have thought wrong.

What rose up at this moment was a monster of pride that transformed Jekyll to Hyde, responding without hesitation to this direct affront to Dad's warped sense of honor. How dare his family embarrass him in this way, in front of his friends!

Big Davy lunged at my mom with murder in his swollen eyes, intent on repaying her in like manner for this unexpected and unforgivable humiliation. Down the stairs we were quickly driven, coerced by the sheer force of my father's anger and self-righteous indignation. Only the menacing shadow of the Brown Square Police Station just across the road saved my mother from a severe beating that would have been administered by an indignant drunk whose tavern reputation reigned supreme over the welfare of a wife and children.

Dad was quickly becoming a liquor-soaked tyrant, and one thing was absolutely for sure: there would be no peace or food in our house of turmoil that night.

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Our housing situation in those dark days consisted of a series of furnished rooms meant specifically for the poor families located in the unmistakably lower-class areas of Belfast. Home life vacillated from a nervous cease-fire to all-out war paralleling Dad's moods and drinking. So we were forced to move often, as our landlords and their companions generally like to keep a quiet and proper place of tenancy. Of course, they rightfully preferred occupants who actually paid their rent at the required time, which is not exactly typical behavior for those who tend to drink away their daily wages.

A Bible proverb tells us that wine makes an idiot of a man, and too much of it will destroy him. In this sense, my father, even though he was an honest and hard worker, was certainly made an idiot by the bottle, and eventually the liquor destroyed all that he should have held dear. It was because of this that our family was made to endure a life of endless uprooting and restarting.

The constant changing of our residence interrupted any sense of continuity in our life and effectively blurred any memories of that time. One thing I do remember is that my older brother (four years my senior) and I were often left in the care of a babysitter.

Our mother could then work as a house cleaner for the well-to-do families. In doing this, she was able to supplement our paltry family income. Mother's housecleaning work ensured our survival. Grateful employers would send her home with handouts of food and clothing, quite literally becoming the reason we were able to stay together as a family.

Unfortunately, there was a downside to this blessing. Mom's ability to provide for us proved to be unspoken permission for Big Davy to march down the ruinous road of drunken irresponsibility at an accelerated pace—a march that all too often found its destination to be Belfast Prison<sup>3</sup>, known for its own special flavor of cruelty and ruthlessness, on Crumlin Road.

It wasn't long before Mom despaired of being able to bear the burden of protecting and providing for the entire family, made all the



harder by Dad's ever-present irresponsibility and threat of violence. This circumstance brought my mom to a point of decision I could not possibly comprehend at such a tender age: She would send me off to live with my aunt in Wales. This would allow her to take more permanent and stable employment, as well as ease the maternal responsibilities.

So without fanfare or preparation, I was shuttled off across the Irish Sea to Neath, nestled snugly in Celtic Wales. It was peaceful and inviting but utterly foreign to my small heart.

Even if you have never experienced it, you can probably imagine the shock and confusion that would accompany such a traumatic event in the life of a fragile little boy. I was abruptly torn (yes, torn, as far as I was concerned) from the undoubted love of my mother to the obligatory charity of others, from the familiar surroundings of my immediate family (even if tumultuous) to the stressful and discomfiting uncertainty of someone else's home.

I was surrounded by strangeness: strange language, strange food, strange customs, and a strange culture. Confusion reigned in my heart, and it was the first of many times in my life I would feel completely lost.

I don't have many memories of my time in Wales in my aunt's household. This could stem in part from the need of a child's mind to forget and block out the bewilderment and pervasive loneliness that haunted me relentlessly during my stay. Not that I wasn't treated well—far from it. My Welsh relatives were a very loving family who had nothing but the most honorable of intentions and did everything they could to make me feel welcome.

It didn't change the fact that my juvenile mind just could *not* grasp any justification as to why I had to be taken away from my mother! While it may not have been outwardly visible, make no mistake. I suffered on the inside.

However, young children are remarkably adaptable, and after a few months, I began to get used to my surroundings and this new culture with its peculiar musical way of speaking. Though I had lost much in the way of maternal love by being sent to Wales, there were many unmistakable benefits. Gone were the nights of fear that were part and parcel of having a violent drunk for a father. Gone were the

stresses of familial conflict, mental tension, and uncertainty that hung like a thick smoke in a home of warring parents and extreme poverty.

Regular healthy meals soon put some meat on my poorly fed bones, and fresh country air brought some color to my pasty city-dweller cheeks. Green fields were my playground now, replacing the concrete canyons of Belfast and its littered alleyways that ran between rows of old houses.

An abundant exposure to sunshine and the outdoors strengthened my skinny, undernourished body that had suffered for so many years in Ulster's cold climate.

But all these benefits still did not bring peace or clarity to my swirling, confused mind. I still felt—and I think rightly so, given my age—that I had been abandoned, left with strangers, and ultimately unwanted.

### **Findings**

Torn away from mother's breast,  
To exiled shore, the babe was banished.  
His mamma's love to feel no more,  
An infant heart sad, sick, and sore!  
Familiar faces? Vanished!  
Foreign folk and culture clinging  
'Round an Ulster heart so young,  
Suddenly confront the yearling;  
Far from hearth and faster fearing;  
Would he ever make it home?  
Toddler's tears, unheeded, flowing,  
Heart hard pining, soul in grief,  
Young mind warping, twisting, rending!  
Lack of love, the babe's brain bending!  
"Abandoned!" is his one belief.  
Who can tell the torment suffered  
In the mind of one so young,  
Who has felt emotions murdered;  
Mother's love in breast unnurtured,  
Far away from family flung.  
Only time reveals the outcome  
Of such sufferings to a child,  
Grown a man, the babe keeps muttering,  
"Vengeance!" in the mind, slow stuttering,  
So soon the soul's defiled.  
So soon the soul's defiled.

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton, 1983

## 1950: Going Home

Mom was coming to get me!

There were no words, especially for one so young, which could have expressed the thrill in my heart anticipating the daily embrace of my mother once more.

Mom arrived in Wales, appearing strong and full of life. She seemed more determined than ever to keep from being knocked down by the difficulty that had become our lot in life. She wept the tears that only a mother can cry, cradling my adoring face in her labor-roughened hands. She kissed away all my fear, uncertainty, and pain. The loneliness melted away.

I was overwhelmed with her love. Mom shared good tidings of how our life was finally to become stable and secure. Dad had seen the error of his ways and signed “the pledge<sup>4</sup>” to quit drinking and thus cease the destruction of our family. This, of course, was wonderful news to my young ears—now I would have both my beloved mother and a father I would no longer fear.

Just when I thought it couldn’t get any better, it did. We had also received an allocation<sup>5</sup> for a place to live of our very own! We were going to have a home! I could imagine no amount of treasure or pleasure that could equal the value of the riches that had become mine in just a few minutes of conversation: reunited with my mom, a changed father, and a home of our very own in which to enjoy it all. Life was finally going to be what every child should experience.

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Mom and I arrived in Belfast, taking the public trams to my grandmother's house in Derry Street, which was located in an area known as "the Hammer" on Shankill Road.

Grandmother was made from traditional Ulster stock, now almost extinct. She was a machine-like hard worker, making and selling meals at bargain prices to other families in the neighborhood. Granny was known to tip the bottle on occasion herself but was never ever known to have indulged to a point of drunkenness. Granny was just one of a host of colorful characters for which working-class Belfast and Shankill Road, in particular, had become known.

My older brother was especially delighted to have me back at home. I can honestly say that we had a "David and Jonathan"<sup>6</sup> relationship. He was four years my senior, but even at three and seven years old, respectively, we were already old men in experiencing life.

We stayed at Granny's for a time while our parents did what they could to fix up and prepare our new home. Those were happy days in Grandmother's house filled with a wealth of aromas from her cooking and an endless industriousness as she endeavored to feed a majority of the neighborhood with simple, home-cooked meals.

Granny believed kids needed to be in bed early, which was always announced as she mounted the stairwell with, "Early to bed, early to rise, makes you healthy, wealthy, and wise!" I've always wondered if she realized that the "wealthy" part forever remained future tense for our family.

Mom got us enrolled in school, and I remember crying hard when the day arrived for me to attend. That morning's adventure is embedded concretely in my memory, as it represented a major milestone in my short but complex life. We left Granny's house with great expectation tempered by nervousness as we navigated across Agnes Street to the Ghetty Junior Primary School.

The school itself gave the impression of a military fort appropriately encompassed by an iron fence topped off with spiked railings. In order to allure its unsuspecting youthful prey, the exterior harshness and lack of creativity was softened with a playground of swings, maypoles, and sandpits—all trapped safely inside the security of the iron fence.

Initially I was resigned sufficiently enough to the thought of starting school, but one look at what seemed more like “Ghetty Junior Prison” than “Ghetty Junior School” and I suddenly longed to be abandoned again in Wales with my aunt rather than face this new incarceration.

I grabbed onto the nearest rail and refused to let go. Even though Mom was much stronger than me, she chose to persuade me with love and understanding rather than physically force me to continue. Of course, that love and understanding was topped off with a promise of some candy from a small store nearby. The coercive power of love and sugar was well worth going to school-prison for a while. Into the building we finally went, a small child full of fear and tears propelled by the power of my promised treat.

My sobs eventually subsided as I was left in the charge of an imposing but lovely teacher. After the first few days, I actually began to look forward to going to school. The following days would be consumed with chalkboards and arithmetic tables—the routine of which may have been monotonous but in reality was healthy and welcome in the life of a child who had already experienced a lifetime of turmoil.

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“Home is where the hut is.” That’s right, *hut*—for that is exactly what I was about to discover was our new, highly anticipated home.

Happy days at Granny’s house ended as abruptly as they began when the announcement came from Mom that our home was ready for occupancy. My brother and I danced with unashamed giddiness—we never had a home and consistently felt deprived of what all of our friends and schoolmates took for granted.

Our joy was rudely interrupted when we were finally brought front and center of the dwelling that would soon become intensely detested. Visions of a dream house instantly disintegrated as we laid eyes on the dilapidated reality that stood in front of us. We stood in openmouthed shock next to the handcart that contained all of our worldly possessions. The disgraceful run-down “home” was nothing more than an old army Nissen hut<sup>7</sup> and a sorry-looking one at that!

My heart sank. Even at my age, I knew that to live in such a place would immediately stereotype our family and ensconce us firmly



within the dregs of society. Any hope and expectancy I had harbored to that point departed just as quickly as had my vision of a real home. My joy was transformed to prideful anger as we entered the already hated hut.

Number nine, Westcircular Road, West Belfast—our hut was laid out like a maze, with lengthy passageways leading to numerous rooms and compartments. It had one large area that contained a huge stove with a piped chimney exiting through the top of the corrugated metal roof. There was a designated living room, which would serve as the family gathering spot for keeping warm, having meals, or listening to our old, beat-up radio.

At the opposite end of the hut were four damp and cold bedroom-type compartments that were far too distant from the heat source to be warmed to any appreciable degree. The middle section of the hut had crudely constructed spaces that served as the bath, a toilet, a coal shed, and one other small bedroom. The bathroom would remain perpetually frigid and lacked any modern conveniences, such as hot water. The bathroom had become the home of the biggest, fattest rat I had ever laid eyes on. Given that the toilet was in a different room, plus the lack of any comforts, our family was happy to avoid the bathroom for the most part and leave it to the rat and her brood.

On the nights when we could actually afford to light the fire, Mom would bathe us in a big tin tub in front of the stove as she sang to us in her special working-class manner. I was never sure where or why she could find the heart to sing so beautifully living in such squalid conditions.

We possessed very little in the way of furniture. Mom would spruce up our poverty by dressing up orange crates with curtain material, which would then serve in various capacities as cupboards, dressers, and end tables.

Mom was a ceaseless worker who could always be found scrubbing the floors or bent over our old glass scrubbing board, trying to keep our raggedy clothes clean. We didn't have much and what we did have was of poor quality, but it was always meticulously clean. Mom made sure of that.

We obtained our dishes and cutlery from the "ragman." As he would make his way through the collection of huts, you could hear his

call of, “Any old rags? Trade for rags.” He would be carrying a big basket in his arms and a big bag of rags slung over his back. The ragman would trade his wares for your rags and old clothing. Given our poverty, we were never short of rags to exchange for dishes, which were constantly needed thanks to Dad smashing them on a regular basis (it hadn’t taken long for Dad to break “the pledge”).

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Our poverty would eventually lead even my blessed mother to compromise her values—a point that was not lost, even on us youngsters. One particular day, we received a negative lesson that would serve to undermine our principles in the future. It began like any other day but would end like no other we had experienced.

Mom frequently had no money and had no way to get any, except by a trip to “the assistance.” This wasn’t a particularly unusual development, but this particular time, we had no money, no food, and rent was due. It was a hopeless and anxious day for us.

My brother, about eight years old then, ushered a young girl into our hut. Evidently she had found a purse, and my hungry brother just happened to be the nearest person to her at the time. She called him over and asked him if his mother had lost her purse. My brother ultimately replied in the affirmative, probably after a battle with his conscience. His slide into deceit was happening fast and, upon escorting the girl through our door, cried, “Mom, this little girl has found your purse!”

Mom took the purse and gave it a look. A cursory examination was rewarded with three or four pound notes and some half-crowns<sup>8</sup>—one half-crown was enough hush money to keep the girl quiet about the lost purse.

Upon closer inspection, the now-stolen purse coughed up two five-pound notes hidden in a concealed pocket. We had never dreamed of so much money at one time. Our wide eyes and skinny bodies were enough justification for Mother’s maternal instincts to choose, what was in her mind, the lesser of two evils: let her children starve or steal this money. As quickly as Mom could clean us up, we loaded up on the next train to do some long-neglected shopping. Our unexpected treasure bought us new shoes, pants, shirts, and underwear, as well as some proper nourishment. The rent was paid in

advance, and despite the guilt of taking the money, we were out of crisis mode for the time being.

To Mother's credit, she did not buy even one single thing for herself but rather chose to trade her personal integrity only for the welfare of her children. Unfortunately it was a lesson of situational values that would return to haunt me later in life.

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Dad was working harder and drinking harder than ever before, having long since abandoned the pledge he swore. Horses and carts had been made obsolete by the new three-wheeled Scammel Lorries,<sup>9</sup> which Dad had learned to drive. While he was progressing at his work, he could not have been doing worse at home.

Mom patiently endured Big Davy's drunken abuse and squandering of family resources—his money and hers—for as long as should she could. The day finally arrived when she put her foot down for real.

Dad staggered home one late night, drunk and dirty, to find himself locked out by a fed up wife who refused to let him in her home, bent on teaching a fool a well-deserved lesson, but the lesson was not going to be accepted on peaceful terms.

The commotion of our hut's front door crashing to the ground brought us all from deep sleep to instant alertness. Dad's hobnailed boot had sent the door splintering from its frame into the middle of the room. Then the nightmare began...

Cups and dishes were smashed and destroyed, the orange-box furniture was kicked all over the room, and windows were busted out by the hardened knuckles of a working-class laborer. The bedlam continued all night long until at long last the dawn found remorse on the face of our family tyrant. As time and exertion brought him to soberness, actual tears of remorse mingled with self-pity flowed from Dad's eyes as he surveyed the carnage. Off he went to work, leaving the destruction for my mother to worry about.

A pattern developed whereby our father would then consume himself with work, hiding from his familial responsibilities for a time in which we would enjoy a temporary cessation of the violence. This

was a sort of self-imposed penance my father would inflict on himself to pay for his last round of drunken terror.

This was the circle of life for us over the next couple years. The pattern became so predictable that we began to be able to anticipate and prepare for the next violent outburst, as well as the more intense conflicts between him and Mother.

When a round of door-locking household warfare and destruction was imminent, I found it utterly useless to try to sleep at night. I would lie in bed, straining to hear the first sounds of Dad's boots approaching the hut. When I finally heard them, my heart would race wildly. As he got near the front door, my heart pounded so hard I was sure that he could hear it!

By this time, my nerves were so shot that it was almost a relief to have him kick the door from its hinges. Immediately the screams of rage and cries of fear commenced as poor Mom would now suffer the brunt of Dad's seemingly bottomless anger. Oh, the heartache of a family at war.

There is a limit to what one person can suffer at the hands of another. Once that limit is reached, the victim seldom can return to anything before that limit and often has an insatiable need for revenge. Mom reached that limit one night when she was eight months pregnant with my sister.

Dad was in the midst of one of his more crazed drunken tirades and had thrown a piece of furniture on top of my mother with no regard for her safety or that of his unborn child. Mom had a doctor summoned who, in turn, immediately called the police. A full-scale war was soon in progress in our living room.

Big Davy ferociously fought a special "heavy squad" of cops from the Brown Square Barracks who were deployed when sheer brute force and numbers were needed to handle a situation. Something inside of my tender heart shriveled and died that night as I watched the police beat my deserving father senseless with baton blows that landed over and over on his bloodied head. They were successful in subduing him, but the aftermath left our hut destroyed, littered with police hats and shreds of their uniform intermingled with blood from all involved.

As they dragged Dad's broken and unconscious body from our hut that night, much of my faith in human nature was dragged away as well, leaving in its place seeds of hatred toward authority that would yield their bitter harvest later on in my life.

With Dad in jail, our family was now forced into even lower forms of degradation. Mom would now sacrifice her remaining threads of dignity at the feet of welfare bureaucrats located in the office of Social Security—the Frederick Street National Assistance Office.

Known commonly as “the assistance,” this block of offices stood imposing and grim like a giant Bastille.<sup>10</sup> It was set back from the street, with the facade jutting straight up like a cliff. Perched on the ledges were countless pigeons that would deposit their droppings disgustingly on the heads of the unfortunates who were forced to enter below. It was here that I learned to detest bureaucrats and red tape.

Poverty forced us to endure the humiliation of “the assistance” office often when we would have to seek government welfare in order to survive. Many times we didn't even have the money for bus fare to get there, and we would have to walk a fairly considerable distance just for the privilege of being humiliated. It didn't matter how unforgiving the weather conditions were—rain, snow, ice, wind—we would make the journey. Very often, because of government red tape or unsympathetic regulations, we made the return trip to our hut without having received any help at all. Our hopes were often crushed by the whims of a pinstriped bureaucrat who cared little for the suffering of people and only for the rigid application of “the rules.”

On one fine day, we entered the big waiting room at “the assistance,” drenched from a heavy rain after being forced to make the trip on foot. Even though it was still early morning, there was already a considerable crowd of needy people seeking not only assistance but also warmth from the steamy radiators as they waited to be interviewed in one of the cubicles that lined the walls.

There were lines of wooden benches known as “forms” that sat in front of an open “inquiry counter” where the downtrodden would sit patiently to find out whether or not they were judged poor enough to receive government welfare. Upon being ushered to the counter by a stone-faced secretary, the applicant would be interrogated about their personal circumstances.

This process would take place in full view and easy earshot of everyone else seated on the waiting benches. It was official policy in those days that the assistance interview was done with a loud voice for all to hear. This would serve in sharing your personal hardships with as many ears as possible while inflicting the greatest possible mental humiliation on the requestor. In one sense, the policy was effective in making sure that only those who were truly needy would endure this process. On the other hand, it was sure to cultivate hatred toward those who would expose your grossest embarrassments for all to hear, especially the shame of having our father in prison. Such humiliation cannot help but lead to frustration and rage in those who experience it. Our family would prove no different.

Sometimes we would get help, which would alleviate our immediate anxieties. Many times we received nothing, resulting in inexpressible dejection and despair. It's hard to put into words the disheartening feeling of spending an eternity in a smoky waiting room and enduring the humiliating interview only to be refused help, leaving us penniless to trod back to our damp, cold, and foodless hut. As a child, I was incapable of comprehending how someone could turn down a mother and her children in need, sending them away with no means to survive, but in the end, this was our lot in life, and we had to learn to live it. My hatred for bureaucratic authority continued to grow.

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Big Davy was released from prison and returned to his family temporarily tamed and repentant. We enjoyed a brief interlude of comparative happiness, but it wasn't long before things were back to normal—at least normal as we understood it. Our father returned to his old self and was soon back on a tear. There were certain ingredients to our life that we could always expect: working, drinking, shouting, violence, destruction—these were the fundamentals of our existence. I often wondered if it would ever end or if this was all there was to life.

Our young sister was born into this storm, and her birth ushered in yet another short-lived period of peace. Mom was left weakened by our sister's birth to the point she could not look after us and the hut without Dad's help. Predictably, Dad needed alcohol and his fair-weather friends more than he needed to be a father and husband.



The battle resumed, and despite Mom's lionhearted effort, she was too weak to prevail. The stress of the recent birth and the current domestic war was causing her health to fail, thus assuring her defeat in the battle with Dad. My father hardly even noticed my mother's condition. Mom was too proud to ask for mercy, and Dad was too drunk to give any.

The wrecking and beating continued unabated until one day Mom returned home with tears in her eyes after a visit to the local clinic on Durham Street. She gathered my brother and me into the cold kitchen and sat us next to the unlit stove. Our baby sister lay next to us, wrapped in blankets, oblivious to both the cold and the impending bad news. Through her tears, Mom began to explain the reason why she was upset. Her clinic visit had resulted in chest X-rays because of her complaints of pain. She would have to wait for definitive results, but it seemed that there was a sort of infection in her lungs.

What did this mean? Was Mom going to die? She did her best to hide her own fears from us, but we were already sensitively tuned to emotional strain from years of domestic turmoil. I could sense that a crisis was looming, and the aura of fear was tangible in our hut that day.

Big Davy returned home drunk that night as usual. This time, however, he found the lights on, the doors unlocked, and Mom waiting at the table. Drunk or not, there would be no battle this night, because the dire news on mother's tongue held sway over everything else. My father quickly sobered and cried tears mingled with soot into his coal-blackened hands. He made many new resolutions that night: he would sign "the pledge" again, come straight home from work, spend his wages on the family, and he would take care of Mom and the family until she got better.

The words of an emotional drunk aren't worth the breath that is wasted to produce them. Big Davy was the secure captive of the alcohol demon, and he proved to be powerless against it. Despite the tearful promises, nothing would change. The dye was cast, the scene was set, and our life of suffering would continue.

## 1954: The Boy's Home

Even Mom's formidable endurance couldn't hold up against continual beatings, relentless worrying, and the stress of poverty.

Hospital tests revealed a shadow on her lungs that betrayed the presence of the much-dreaded tuberculosis.<sup>11</sup> It seems that she had developed pleurisy,<sup>12</sup> which had taken advantage of her weakened physical condition and degenerated into tuberculosis.

It broke Mother's heart to have to explain to us what it meant to have the disease. She would need to place us in the "care" of government institutions—a boy's home for me and my brother and another home for our sister. Mom convinced us there was nothing to worry about because it would only be "for a short time" as she went to the Musgrave Park Sanatorium to be treated. We would go to our respective homes, Mom would visit us often while she got well, and Dad would work hard to take care of us all.

None of those assurances held any sway in my aching heart the day the taxi came to extract us from our hut and our mother's care. We sat waiting on some orange boxes—my older brother was ten years old, and I was a ripe old age of seven. We were dressed in our best clothes after a bath in the big tin tub in front of the stove. We convinced ourselves that there was nothing to be upset about. Our home would be split up, but it would only be for a short while.

Mom busied herself with chores, trying to kill some agonizing time before her children were taken away. Each time she passed by, I reached out to touch her, trying to extract some extra love from her to

take with me. She dared not stop and look at me, because it would have doubtlessly resulted in her emotional collapse.

The old clock with its smashed face—a victim of Big Davy’s temper—relentlessly ticked off our final minutes at home. My heart seemed to beat in unison with the clock as the seconds streamed by without mercy.

When the big black taxi pulled up, I flew into my mother’s skirts, pleading with her to not send me away. Great tearful drops streamed down my mom’s face as she kissed me and held me close. It was obvious that her heart was breaking too, even as she searched for the words to comfort her children.

The door opened, and the professional home splitters entered the room, bringing with them a wealth of experience in tearing apart already hurting families. Their reassuring smiles were anything but, and their comforting words were worthless. Looking back, I feel sorry for them, for I suppose there is no “good” way to do what they had to do.

Looking out the rain-spattered rear window of the big black car, I watched as my mother’s image slowly disappeared. What was waiting for us? Would there be any happiness? What did the future hold?

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We were escorted to the Park Lodge Home for Boys by a female welfare worker that kept up constant friendly chatter in a doomed attempt to cheer up two inconsolable, heartbroken boys. My older brother had his arm around my skinny shoulders in compliance with Mom’s last instructions for him to protect me. I unashamedly pressed my face against his chest, replacing Mom’s embrace with the only source of familial comfort at my disposal. It all seemed like a bad dream, and I was hoping to wake up and find myself back in my mother’s arms.

It wasn’t a dream, though, and that reality became clear with a right-hand turn down Antrim Road, which took us to “the home.”

Park Lodge Home for Boys was set in a veil of trees and shrubs, its gaunt and grey construction starkly contrasting the nature around it. The main facility was almost completely concealed from Antrim Road, reachable only by a long, winding lane. A small creek-like drain

that ran the length of the rhododendron-and-bush-lined road labored to channel away excess water flowing down from Cavehill Mountain that surrounded the home. The whole of the place left one with the feeling of a guarded castle, complete with battlements<sup>13</sup> and quarters.

The house was old but of sturdy construction. It was in a remote location but easily reached by road and effectively secluded by surrounding trees. With Cavehill Mountain providing a natural barrier to the rear, the property was a relatively urban-free environment. This would be my “home” for the next two years.

We emerged from the winding road onto a stoned-paved drive that brought us to the front of the institution. The driver and our lady escort extracted my brother and me from the car and led us up the steps of our new castle-prison home.

Standing in the doorway were two women—one of whom donned a sterile, professional smile. She reminded you of a doctor that would smile at a patient in a hospital bed the exact same way she would smile before amputating the same person’s leg. She would never prove to be a cruel person, but her smile could preclude with equal expression a pleasant “good morning” or an unpleasant “bend over” in preparation for a spanking. Ms. Margaret unnerved me from the moment I laid eyes on her.

However, one look at the other woman, Ms. Kathleen,<sup>14</sup> was enough to send me scurrying for safety into the arms of Ms. Margaret.<sup>15</sup> I was at first quite sure she was a man in odd clothing, and as it turned out, I never once saw the rubbery-faced, swarthy Ms. Kathleen in anything but men’s trousers the entire time of my incarceration. She had thick, greasy salt-and-pepper hair, which was combed quite severely straight back from her blunt forehead, serving only to enhance her manliness. Her ham-sized left hand was stuck forcefully into her coat pocket while she ominously flicked a willow branch against her leg with her right. She finished off the effect by intermittently puffing on a cigarette that dangled in masculine fashion from the corner of her mouth. If her appearance and demeanor were meant to intimidate us, she had been quite successful in her effort.

My brother and I were marched by Ms. Steely Smile and Ms. Don’t-Mess-With-Me into our new home. We were escorted to our rooms, where our wet clothing was promptly removed and replaced with warm, dry garments. Then we were led to a large room—which I

would later learn was the dining hall—where I was reunited with my brother. Sitting upon little stools, we were left there to gather our thoughts in front of a warm fire.

Relaxation finally came, and my heart stopped racing as I took in my new surroundings. The room was painted in two drab colors, with a horizontal black line painted halfway up the wall. There was a single window on the lonely walls providing the only view to the outside world. The ill-lit and dreary décor only added to my sense of dread as the fire cast eerie shadows over the entire scene.

A glance behind me revealed two long dining room tables set with government-issued plates. State welfare-stamped cups were placed in military fashion upside down onto precisely lined-up saucers. I watched Ms. Kathleen come and go quickly, setting up two more places at the table, an act that brought home the realization that we were here to stay—for a while, at least.

I cried as I looked into my brother's face. He was a slightly older version of me, with his ragged, thin frame. We were all alone, unloved, and motherless in the maze of the state welfare system. I sobbed as my loving brother came to my side. We had not spoken a word up to that point, and simultaneously the emotional dam burst, and our hearts broke in unison. We clung to each other for support and comfort as our brotherly bond was being cast for life.

We ate our first meal alone, which made the dining room table seem all the more gigantic. The rest of the “inmates,” as we would come to call ourselves, were at school. We had the room to ourselves, except for occasional entrances of Ms. Margaret and her helper, who both tended to stay in the large stove-lined kitchen. As long as we whispered, we could be sure of a little privacy as we discussed our new confines.

We had never eaten at a table laid out with matching silverware and dishes—Dad's drunken rages made sure of that. Our tableware historically consisted of a wide range of sizes and colours and was never any finer than what the ragman had to offer. You can imagine the motley collection of cutlery that comes from collecting a knife here and a spoon there over time.

We finished our nervous meal, clearing every speck of food from our fine plates. We were both afraid of what the rest of the day would

bring, but at least we had each other. You can't feel too bad about life with a full belly. Bitter tears would often be shed worrying about and missing Mom, but for now, we had our own crisis to deal with. At least we were facing it without hunger.

Curiosity and nervous expectation was our dessert as we anticipated the return of the other youthful inhabitants. How would they treat us? What were new kids subjected to? We wouldn't have to wait long to find out.

My brother and I were taken upstairs to a large bathroom where we were bathed by Ms. Margaret and promptly returned to our place in front of the fire, where my eyelids suddenly became as heavy as lead. I repeatedly drifted off into half-consciousness until my brother woke me with, "Here they come."

I heard them long before I saw them. It sounded like a small herd making its way to the room amidst repeated questions of, "Who are they, Ms. Margaret? How old? Where'd they come from? Will they be here long?" During our incarceration at the home, this exact scene would be replayed countless times as each new inmate arrived. "New arrival days" were a welcome break in the monotonous grind of institutional life. In they poured like little ants, excitement etched on their frail faces.

I clung to my older brother for reassurance. I instinctively sought refuge from this crowd that examined every detail about us. I loved my ten-year-old brother all the more when he put his arm around me, silently announcing to all that to get to me they would have to go through him.

The oldest kid staring at us was only a few months older than my brother, so my sibling was immediately propelled to the top of the inmate hierarchy. This would serve to effectively shield me from any harassment the other children would normally dish out to a newcomer in order to test their mettle. I had quite a chip on my shoulder—a trait that would cause me grief my whole life and that soon led me to abuse my privileged position as little brother of a leader.

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Over the months, I would come to learn that the other boys had been placed in the home for various reasons. Some came from family

circumstances similar to ours—illness, divorce, or violence had broken their home. Others came from even more severe situations of abandonment or abuse. The saddest were those whose parents were perfectly healthy and able; they just simply didn't *want* the child.

One of the older boys was an introvert with eyes full of fear, the result of being brutalized repeatedly by his drunken father. He was uncared for and unprotected by his wanton mother and finally abandoned with the other homeless ghetto children. This poor wretch had suffered terribly and, to add insult to injury, was now a chronic bed wetter—a common affliction for a severely traumatized child.

His bed was a single iron-framed spring and mattress that sat in the long line of other bunks in the dormitory. By necessity, his was strategically placed in the last spot so the rest of us would be spared the urine odor as much as possible. I really felt sorry for him during his daily humiliation. He would rise earlier than anyone else, gather up his soiled bedding, and, with great dejection, set off to the wash. There he would clean his sheets with boiling water and carbolic soap that never quite removed all the smell.

The other boys, being cruel in the way that only little boys can be toward each other, would barrage him with taunts and relentless degradation, which frequently produced great sobs and tears from its victim. Any comfort that was offered was quickly shunned, because being babied only added to the shame. So he would endure his personal hell all alone for fear of appearing weak and, in this way, attempt to hold on to some shred of personal dignity.

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During my two-and-half-year stay at the Park Lodge Home for Boys, I experienced a wealth of incidents and events, most of which were sad and a few happy but all memorable in a negative sense. Our time there was devoid of parental attention, and often I thought the treatment by the staff was harsh. Looking back, the harsh treatment may well have been necessary from the viewpoint of running a home.

It was here that I was to continue to learn many “lessons” that would shape my future choices and behavior.

**A Visit to the Boys' Institution**

Who are these?  
What hapless hovels have  
Disgorged so dingy a human dross?  
Behold their faces!  
Manifold features forlorn,  
Yet all looking through the same orb'd pain.  
Hold not their gaze?  
For to look too long  
Is to palsy one's peace with their past.  
Did you glimpse it?  
That shadow of soul  
Staring out, reaching out, clutching for love?  
Can you sense it?  
Strength of will maturing  
With each new hurt, enduring, stoic-like.  
Can anything be done?  
Yes. A diet of daily discipline  
Should bring these up right!  
Society's hands are clean!

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton, 1983



## 1956: How Much Heartache

The years at Park Lodge followed distinct stages for me, beginning with a time of emotional trauma stemming from a second separation from my mother's love. That period was followed by a time of exploration and wonder as I discovered the marvels of nature that surrounded the home in which I now found myself. The home was located in the city but still had a definitive rural feel because of the woods and mountain that made up the grounds.

The third stage was one of apathy mingled with a splash of self-pity as I pondered such thoughts as, "Nobody cares about me. Why should I care about me or anyone else?" It was a difficult time, because my attitude caused me to harden my heart against the other boys, resulting in many fights and countless arguments. The vast majority of my conflicts were with the older and stronger boys, partly to prove myself and partly because they had my older brother to contend with as well.

I didn't miss an opportunity to bully the kids my own age either. I had a no-lose situation with them, because anyone my age or younger who didn't succumb to my will would be faced with the threat of my older brother, who himself wasn't one to miss a chance to rule over others. This was not the way to gain popularity, loyalty, or friendship, and "you reap what you sow" would come back to haunt me later on.

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During this time, I became part of "Lifeboys,"<sup>16</sup> and the uniform we wore was a source of great pride for me because of the attention it would draw from onlookers. I can still recall the warm feeling of

vanity that came with believing I was the center of attention, which was an emotion that was becoming more common in me as time passed.

One particular night, my pride was wafting freely as I made the bus ride home from the big Church Hall at Fort William Park. I had just attended my weekly Lifeboys meeting by myself, because the other boy who normally came along had taken ill. It seemed to me that all the other adult bus riders were admiring me in my uniform, and I was drinking in the perceived adulation.

In the warmth and safety of the bus, I was not concerned with the foreboding darkness and howling wind outside. My shiny brass badge was pinned prominently on my chest for all to admire, and the looks and nods of admiration were many. I was riding high as I paid my token and assured the bus driver that I knew exactly which stop I was to get off at.

As I jumped off the bus, a kindly lady pressed a coin into my hand before I had a chance to tell her that we were not allowed to accept charity from strangers. She boarded and the bus roared away, leaving me alone under the glow of a street lamp to reconsider my conclusion that no one cared about me.

The security I felt riding on the bus quickly dissipated as I pondered the dark loneliness of the leafy lane ahead of me. Making this walk alone for the first time, it never dawned on me how quiet and black it was. I shivered as I started the walk, and with each step, my nerves became more and more edgy. My boyish bravado was not to be found in the absence of an audience, and neither my uniform nor my brass badge instilled any courage in me.

At the halfway point of the lane's length, there was a bend in the drive where I could see neither the street lamps I had just left nor the porch light at the home, which represented a safe destination.

I would have most likely finished the journey with nothing more than some worn out nerves if some small creature at just the right moment had not decided to rustle in the bushes. Nerves turned into fright as every noise now became a potential danger. Cold sweat ran down my spine, and terror gripped my imagination as I heard the devil chuckle. I just knew he was reaching out to drag me into hell.

“God, help me!” I screamed as I took off in a dead sprint for the lodge. Real or not, I just knew that all the legions of hell were hot on my heels as I ran for my life, and with each step, a different paw or claw from the pit reached out to snare me. I screamed and screamed in fear all the way to the porch light of the home, and just when I thought that I was safe, two hands reached out and clutched my skinny shoulders! I was doomed for sure, caught by the devil himself. As the tears cleared from my eyes, I realized it wasn’t Satan who had grabbed me—it was Ms. Kathleen. I fainted into her manly arms.

The next morning, I was allowed to sleep off the effects of whatever medication was administered after I fainted. I woke up late, quietly crying from the embarrassment and shame of now realizing that nothing was chasing me down the road, except my own overactive imagination. I dreaded the inevitable jeers, snickers, and taunts of “cry baby” that would soon be mine to endure from the other inmates. I wallowed in self-pity and trepidation knowing that the “devil” I had heard laughing last night was little more than the drainage creek gurgling its watery contents in the black of night. It was going to be a bad day.

My big brother was there for me, with his usual comforting arm around my shoulders. He tried to convince me there was nothing to worry about, because he would protect me from any teasing. “Is Mom ever going to come and get us?” I asked him through my tears. He assured me that she would, and I realized that without his love, I’m not sure I would have been able to cope with what life had dealt us. I was soon to find out that our days together were numbered, because a brother’s love was not held sacred by faceless bureaucrats.

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Tears of a different kind distorted my vision as I wriggled to free myself from Big Jack, the new kid who was currently perched on my bony rib cage. Jack had my wrists secured in his vice-grip hands as he stretched out my arms, pinning my shoulders to the ground and placing his face directly over mine. He had been my latest target for proving myself, but this time, it had totally backfired as Big Jack delivered a sound thrashing complete with verbal taunting.

“Your old mama’s sick!” he teased straight in my face while bouncing hard up and down on my stomach. Hearing those words caused something to happen inside of me that I had never

experienced. A strange, eerie calm came over my mind and emotions. Jack must have sensed this change, because he immediately stopped bouncing on me and peered intently into my eyes for some indication of what was happening. Whatever it was that he saw caused him to immediately start trying to make peace with me, telling me he was going to let me up and that he wanted us to be friends.

He never got a chance. Two strong hands clutched his throat from behind, and he was rudely plucked from his seat on top of me by my older brother and thrown to the ground. I made eye contact with my brother, and our silent communication confirmed what I was to do next while my brother held down my antagonist.

As I approached Jack, my steps became slow and deliberate. I spoke to him in a condescending, almost fatherly tone. "You've been a very stupid boy, Jack. What was that you were saying about my mother, Jack?"

His eyes pleaded for mercy and betrayed his fear. "I didn't say nothin'. I didn't mean nothin'. Honest."

"Oh yes, Jack, you did. Go ahead. Tell us what you said."

Jack's eyes went wet as he considered the best of several bad options at this point. He must have decided that compliance would improve his fate. "I said that your mama was gettin' an operation for TB," he muttered in complete submission. "I heard a welfare woman tellin' Ms. Margaret. Honest. That's the truth."

I flashed a wicked smile at Jack. He returned it with a feeble smile of his own that lasted only until I kicked him squarely in the mouth. He screamed as I methodically kicked and punched his body, all the while talking to him in mock kindness. It was my brother's voice that interrupted my evil brutality. "Hey! Kenny, you gotta show a little mercy." He rebuked me, looking down at the now bruised and bleeding Jack.

"Is that right?" I retorted. "Since when has anybody ever showed us any mercy?" I walked away unrepentantly to ponder what had just happened with Jack and, more importantly, what was happening inside of me.

That evening at dinner, everyone was unusually hushed as Jack's swollen face was on display from my vicious beating. Ms. Kathleen

monitored my older brother, who had been blamed for what I did. Later that night, all three of us were interrogated by Ms. Margaret in her private office, but the true facts were never revealed.

What did come up, however, were the facts about my mother's operation. We were told she had undergone major surgery, having seven of her ribs removed and being left with a permanently collapsed lung. In 1950, procedures that extensive were a very serious matter, but there was no other way if Mom was to be saved from the killer disease attacking her body. Finding out these details, we waited for days to hear news of her recovery, and it plummeted me into worry and depression. Once again, my brother came to the rescue as my whole world revolved around finding about how Mom was doing. Mom's death would mean the end of happiness for me, or so I believed, and her recovery would mean that there was still hope to be free and loved again.

Finally, the news came—Mom had pulled through! She would be confined to bed for quite a long while, but she was in no danger of dying from the disease or the operation. Utter relief filled my soul, and my heart was immediately unburdened from the weight it had carried to that point. We thanked God for saving Mom, then promptly forgot about him as we went on with life.

The good news about Mom carried me for several weeks but rudely ended one day when I returned from classes to find out my caring, protecting, loving brother had been removed to another home. The welfare people had decided to separate us "in the interest of order at Park Lodge." My heartless attack on Big Jack had finally reaped a bitter but deserved harvest. For two solid weeks, I cried my eyes out and would not be comforted. My last remaining source of love was now gone, and I wondered how much heartache one person could bear.

## A Room with a View

Life at Park Lodge without my brother was pretty grim. I felt very much alone living among the other boys but not a part of them. I was now the target of revenge from many of the boys I had tormented or dominated, having taken far too much advantage of my older brother's physical superiority. Now I had to fight more often and with more ferocity in order to keep some portion of the status I once enjoyed. I set my mind to endure what hardship would be mine while inwardly hoping that my predicament would end sooner rather than later.

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One of the best days of my entire short life to that point was the day that Ms. Margaret informed me my mother was coming to visit. I was almost sick with emotion, tears flowed from my face, and my heart raced with happiness. When the time came, I dashed through the big dining room, across the narrow landing, and into Ms. Margaret's private office.

As I entered, I was taken aback by the sight of a neatly dressed lady in a powder-blue, three-quarter-length coat, black skirt, and a hat. She was of stout build, and her red, swollen eyes betrayed recent crying. This was not the closely guarded mental picture I had of my mother, which was one of a thin, almost haunted woman in constant fright and worry for her family. A closer look revealed the etched lines and maternal love in her face, and it only took a moment for me to realize that this indeed was my mother.

I flew into her arms, hardly able to contain my emotions. I was at last reunited with my mother, whom I loved most of all, and we cried together with joy.

Mom wanted to take me with her that very moment, but Ms. Margaret was staunch in her requirement that the proper paperwork needed to be completed. More importantly, Mom would have to satisfy the welfare authority's rule that proper housing would await the return of her children.

No matter what, the rigid red tape was stronger than our personal wishes, so for the time being, I would be staying a little longer at Park Lodge. Mom was fit to be tied over this development, but the ever-smiling and clinical Ms. Margaret was able to reason with and console her. Mom finally had to agree it would be better for her children to stay put until a home was waiting for them.

After spending some time together and being reassured that my removal would happen immediately when a home was prepared, Mom kissed me good-bye and left to go visit my brother and sister. I could not have been any happier. I was going home soon.

You might think what was most vivid in my memory was the thrill of leaving the home or the bliss of being reunited with my mother and brother. Strangely, though, what sticks with me most intensely are the faces of the other boys that I left behind at Park Lodge.

Despite any past conflicts, we were always happy when one of the inmates was finally freed. Grudges and childish fighting were quickly forgotten in the face of freedom for one of us. The other boys clung to me as if to extract some of my happiness for themselves before I was gone. They looked intently at me, trying to capture the image of what hope looked like so they could dream of it for themselves.

Their thin, haunting, hopeless stares linger in my mind, even to this day. I often wonder how many, if any, of those boys ever knew anything else in life except disappointment, institutionalism, and welfare, which kept them out of sight and out of mind of the rest of society.

Finally, the day came when my mom collected my brother and me from our respective government homes. She led us to a small street just off the Limestone Road in North Belfast called Alexandra Avenue.

We passed through the gates of Alexandra Park to a house right next to the park itself. Mom warned us solemnly that we were to be very quiet while in this house, because the landlord lived directly below the room we would be renting. So we entered into our latest home like mice trying to sneak across the floor unnoticed.

Just inside the front door of the Alexandra Avenue house was a long landing with two doors to the right and a stairway to the left that led to our furnished room. The doors on the right belonged to our landlord's private quarters consisting of a big sitting room for entertaining guests, a large living room, and a kitchen, which was where the occupants spent most of their time.

After navigating half the creaking and squeaking stairway, the landlord's door swung open. "Ah, is that you there, missus?" came the voice of the landlord's wife. "Is that yer two little ones?" she inquired. Mom responded affirmatively. "Very good then. You have informed the boys about keeping the noise down, haven't you? We can't have the mister being disturbed, can we?" she asked in a condescending manner, which she didn't even attempt to veil.

The message was clear: be quiet or get kicked out, and with that, we continued on to our room just around the corner.

The room was fairly large, having once been the front bedroom of this huge late-Victorian house. It would have to do for the three of us, serving as bedroom, kitchen, and living room all in one. It was inadequate for an entire family, but if this one room meant that I could be with my mom and brother, then I didn't care what size it was. The downside was that my sister would have to remain at the girls' home until we could find a bigger home, casting gloom on what would have otherwise been a glorious family reunion.

There was one large window at the front of our room that faced the street with its red-bricked houses and large flagstone pavements. The entrance to Alexandra Park was also in view, and we could watch the people come and go all day long. A smaller window actually faced directly toward the park, and it was here that I would spend countless hours gazing out at the swans on the big pond and families with children who would throw breadcrumbs to the ducks.



It may have been a small room that we lived in, but it was a room with a view, and it might as well have been a mansion, as far as I was concerned.

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It required frequent trips to the Social Security office on Frederick Street to maintain the financial resources we needed to survive over the next year at our Alexandra room. We existed on very little materially during this time, but it was hardly noticed in the bliss of being together.

Mother had become a Christian while she was in the hospital and would now frequently read to us from an old Bible that had been given to her. We listened to the stories of miracles and fantastic events with great interest, but they never quite seemed real to us. They remained just “stories” to us, not unlike stories from any other book. Without the luxury of a radio or television, we would spend long winter evenings reading the Bible.

One day we found ourselves without one bite of food in the house. We were expecting to receive a national assistance payment book in the morning mail that day, but the postal carrier came and went, taking our hope with him.

Mom informed us that we would sit down at our table and pray for a loaf of bread to appear! Her faith in God would take a hit that morning as we prayed and prayed, but no loaf appeared. Mom seemed genuinely shocked that the miraculous bread had not materialized, and it visibly hurt her to think that God had not heard our petition. Although no miracles occurred, we did get the check we were expecting in the noon mail, and so we learned that day that God can work providentially using everyday events too.

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On her next visit to the home where our sister still lived, Mom promised we could go with her. We were thrilled at the prospect of getting to see her as we made the journey by foot through the park, down to Southern Road, and over to where the girls’ home was located.

After ringing the bell at the big front door, a friendly nurse ushered us into a neat, clean-smelling waiting room. Mother had

visited many times before and was known by name to all the staff at the home. We waited for a bit before being escorted out to a large garden area toward the rear, where a group of children were playing. In the midst of the group stood our little baby sister, with her white-blond hair and searching eyes.

Mom's face was already filled with the tears that accompany a forced separation from those we love most, but it was mingled with a strange expression that I could not identify. There was a disturbing element of shame and fear on her face that greatly puzzled me until I realized from my sister's reaction what this was all about.

My poor sister had been taken from us at five months old. The moment she saw Mom, she ran for the protection of the nearest nurse, who were the only "parents" she had ever known. We were just strangers to her. Her own mother was a foreigner coming to remove her from the only family and life she had ever known. My heart broke for my mom, realizing the pain that was hers to endure at this moment, knowing she was a source of fear for a child for whom she had nothing but love. A mother's love can never be underestimated, though, and Mom stepped up for the task at hand.

It took quite an effort from all of us before our sister would finally come to accept us as her family and love us as we loved her. Over the years, the trauma of the situation remained obvious, because even though my sister was part of our family, she always kept her distance from us, even if just enough to notice.

Still lacking an adequate home, we were not able to take her home just yet and had to be content with frequent visits. This situation was to soon change as Mom received a long overdue notice about a permanent home that had become available for us. Yet again, the McClintons were on the move, but finally, we would all be together again.

## 1957: A Bungalow by the Sea

As our sister grew to accept us more over time, the urgency increased to find a permanent home in which to bring her to where my mother could establish something that resembled stability. Mom doubled her already tireless efforts to achieve this goal. Day after day, no matter how bad the weather was, she would make the long walk down to city hall in the heart of Belfast to doggedly lobby politicians, clergy, and government officials to help her find us housing accommodations.

I can remember Mother praying hard to Jesus Christ, asking him to bless our efforts and help us find a home. Her faith and persistence were to be severely tested as bureaucracy and red tape frustrated her every step. With each trip to our mailbox—morning, noon, and evening—the poor postman was interrogated immediately for any sign of response from the government. For many long months, the only news we would hear was, “We have noted your urgent request for accommodation, and you shall receive our decision in due course.”

It wasn't long before we could recite the contents of these worthless form letters, even before Mom opened them, and though it really was not funny at all, we found sour humor in the situation. We thanked God that we were able to laugh at what seemed to be a hopeless predicament, because the humor seemed to keep us from losing our minds.

Big Davy continued his well-established pattern of shirking responsibility toward his family, and Mom had no doubt that this greatly contributed to our problems in finding a home. Once again, he had let us down when we needed him most. When Mom was taken to

the hospital for her operation, Dad had abandoned our previous hut and taken off across the water to England. The housing officials considered the abandonment of a government-issued home an insult to their authority. Even if the dreaded hut was nothing more than a rundown metal box that they themselves wouldn't be caught dead walking through, much less living in—it was a cardinal sin to give it up.

Excitement filled the air the day Mom opened an official brown envelope that was different from the rest. From the first sentence, the despised official jargon and bureaucratic verbiage was missing from this letter, and I knew instantly that good news was on the way. “What is it, Mom? What is it? Did we get a house? Did we get one?” Our curious voices bombarded her with rapid-fire questions.

Mom informed us that we had indeed been allotted a home of our own—a prefabricated bungalow down by the sea. There would be no more tiptoeing around in someone else's house, afraid to make one too many sounds lest we were thrown out. Not only would we finally have a home, even better, we would be able to get our sister and all be together as one family.

Wasting no time, Mom went straight down to city hall to find out the details and bring home the keys to our new bungalow. In those days, one-parent families were frowned upon by the government bureaucracy, so it became necessary for Mother to convince an uncle of ours to sign for the responsibility of the housing. As long as we took care of the place and adhered to the rules, the self-important bureaucrats would turn a blind eye to our single-parent situation.

We set off the next morning, armed with cleaning equipment—brooms, buckets, scrubbing brushes, disinfectant, and plenty of towels—with which to clean our new home. Various members of mom's family, sisters and cousins, came over to help so that we could get moved in as quickly as possible. It was a happy group on a happy day enjoying happy conversation, as everyone knew that the completion of this home would mean that our little sister would finally get to be with her real family.

The bungalow was located in the Shore Road district of North Belfast, being part of two main groups known as Downview and Loughside Bungalows. These prefabricated homes belonged to the Belfast Corporation Department and had been built as temporary

dwellings shortly after the Second World War to accommodate those who lost their residence to German bombings. Like many government solutions that were intended to be temporary, the bungalows had become the permanent home for the lower-class welfare portion of society.

Our prefab was located in the Loughside group of bungalows situated right along Shore Road, deeming us more fortunate than those in the back of the group who had to live with the constant racket from the railroad tracks that ran by us on the way to Larne. We were also privileged to have less interaction with the large water rats that flourished in the swampy region around the river-turned-open sewer, which ran alongside the railroad. This stagnant stream served as a type of moat on one side of the bungalow community, serving to guard us or corral us, depending on whom you were asking. Shore Road, with its heavy traffic, blocked us in on one side, and the railroad tracks, with its sewer drain, took care of the other boundary, sandwiching the complex quite effectively.

The bungalow was made of dirty gray asbestos, with the door and window frames being fashioned of galvanized iron painted dark green. There was one door at the front and another on the side of the rectangular structure, with sections of corrugated asbestos for a roof. Out back was a small tin hut that was used as a coal shed, but my brother, who had recently taken an interest in pigeons, had other plans for it. Inside the prefab, there was a kitchen, a large living room, two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a toilet, all of which were connected by a shared landing. It might as well have been a luxury suite in a fine hotel as far as we were concerned! We had a refrigerator, an electric boiler for laundry, and electric cooker and oven, and a fold-down ironing table fitted to one of the dining room walls.

We did not have any furniture, but that did not dampen our spirits, because we were so thrilled to have our own home. My aunt gave us an old double bed with springs and mattress that sat on top of a wooden frame, complete with the inevitable sunken depression right in the middle into which the sleeper would inevitably roll. Mom got some orange crates and dressed them up with curtain material, and these worked quite nicely as chairs and bedside stands. While living in our previous room, we had cobbled together a collection of cooking utensils and cutlery, so along with the built-in kitchen appliances, our cooking and dining needs were covered. Each

bedroom already had a built-in wardrobe area that was more than adequate to hold our meager collection of clothes.

Our hardworking family made quick work of the cleaning in typical Shankill Road tradition, scrubbing the bungalow until the floors were gleaming like the decks of a luxury passenger liner. With the cleaning complete, Mom inaugurated our palace by firing up the stove and putting on a kettle for our first cup of tea. We all gathered around the warm glowing fire that burned behind two little glass front doors, releasing its warmth onto us as we sipped the hot tea. Our hearts were as warm as our drinks on that day, and we enjoyed both the thrill of having our own home and the family camaraderie that came from the company of Mom's relatives. Many of the emotions of stability, security, and parental care that we had been starved for all of our lives were ours to enjoy that evening. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had an identity and, at long last, a place I belonged.

There was absolutely no emotional cost to packing up our possessions and leaving the room at Alexander Avenue. We bid good riddance to the place where we were afraid to even breathe hard for fear of the landlord or his lady giving us the boot. Here we had seen the life lived under the false pretenses of an imaginary social status of which the landlord and his pompous family imagined themselves to be a part. We were glad to return to the secure independence of our own home, poverty stricken or not.

Thus we made our grand entrance into the bungalow, bringing all our worldly possessions on one wagon cart. We stopped to visit several relatives on the way, picking up the bed and a chair, looking just like any other "normal" family moving into a new home. The neighbors came to assess us under the guise of introducing themselves, and all in all, they were very friendly and kind. One of them, Ms. Batty, was exceptionally gracious and stayed on after everyone else had left. She offered her expertise on how to stick a piece of orange peel in the electric meter to lower the monthly bill and cheat the utility company. Mom politely but frankly thanked Ms. Batty for her suggestion and informed her that, because she was a Christian, she could not do such a dishonest thing. Mom's convictions were to fail her on a later date when she would be forced to compromise her faith to keep the bungalow warm and feed her

family, but for now, Ms. Batty got an earful about her orange peel trick.

The final piece of the puzzle fell into place when Mom brought little sis home. Mom's dream had come true: we were a family and under one roof again.

Our first family meal together was without our father, which had very little impact on us as children. We sat on our orange crates, pulling down the ironing board to use as our kitchen table. Mom gave it her touch with a nice plastic tablecloth that had been donated, and other than the size of the "table" and the odd shape of our "chairs," we could have been just any old average Irish family gathering for dinner. We ate a king's feast of potatoes, cabbage, ham, and thick Bisto gravy that was served on our best ragman plates. We gazed lovingly at Mom's face as she took a seat at the head of the ironing-board table and bowed her head to thank God for our bounty.

"Father," she prayed, "we thank thee for bringing us together once more. We thank thee for bringing us safely through all our troubles. We thank thee for helping us to be a family once again. Bless this food to us, Father, for we ask it in Jesus's name. Amen." When Mom lifted her eyes, there were tears of joy streaming down her face, and we all knew that this was a good day indeed.

Over time, life in our bungalow brought hard days and bad days to add to the good days. Having no father supporting us, we were constantly without money and had to rely on government assistance to survive. This amounted to a few dollars a week as "benefits" and a handful of change that was called "family allowance."

Negotiating the heavy traffic across Shore Road on foot, Mom would retrieve the benefits on Monday and allowance on Tuesday from the post office. She had to figure out how this money would pay the rent, buy coal for the fire, feed the whole family for a week, and still have enough left over to pay our non-orange-peel-manipulated electric bill. Clothes and shoes were out of the question on such a meager budget, and poor Mom sacrificed any comfort or need of her own for her children. I don't know how she did it, but somehow we managed to survive due in large part, I'm sure, to the sheer happiness of just being together as a family.

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday were "fat" days when Mom would stock up for the week having just received the welfare money. She was a master at finding the most inexpensive brands of tea, sugar, bread, and other staples, along with tins of peas, beans, potatoes, and gravy. The fat days prepared us for the persistent hunger the rest of the week.

Monday was also "payback day" when we made sure to return every cup of flour or sugar that we had borrowed from neighbors, thus erasing any shame or embarrassment that might otherwise come with asking for a "loan" when times got really bad and we were forced to seek charity from the community.

Charity, in the "free gift" sense, was never mentioned or expected. The only charity that was employed was in the sense of asking for help when it was truly needed but meticulously repaying every penny or ounce so that some shred of dignity could be held intact. It was certainly a hand-to-mouth existence, but it was all we knew, so it really wasn't as gloomy as it may otherwise sound.

Those days were days of happiness and togetherness tempered by the hardness of poverty. It was during this time of deprivation that I would become an avid pupil in the street school of the neighborhood gang.



## 1958: Schools, Skills, and Growing Up

Our frequent change of residences resulted in me attending at least nine or so different schools by the age of eleven. Along with our new bungalow house came a measure of stability in our education, and with that, I graduated from Lowood Primary School to the just-built Dunlambert Secondary School at Fort William Park, Belfast. I had determined that I would do well in school and finally give my poor mother something to be proud of.

Big Davy, however, seemed to never miss a cue and arrived back on the scene just in time to wreck my plans for a good education. The typical period of reconciliation awarded us with a relatively quiet and stable household for a few months just as I began to attend the Dunlambert School. It was not long after, however, that my ambitions were shattered by something out of my control, which came in the form of my dad's drinking problem.

About the time that I began to attend Dunlambert, my father returned to his usual pattern of drunken violence followed by remorse. Our newest home was victim to windows shattering, dishes crashing on the floor, and furniture being smashed to splinters. In the same way our physical possessions were broken and destroyed, all of our hopes and dreams for peace and doing well were also broken in the process. It seemed hopeless at times that there would ever be a chance of escaping this type of life.

Arriving home drunk in the middle of the morning, unable to kick in the steel doors of the bungalow, Big Davy changed his tactics. He would yell into the house, "Are you going to open this door?" We were instructed by our fed up but determined mother to be perfectly quiet

and stand clear of any windows lest we become a victim of flying glass. The inevitable shattering of windows would follow with Dad making his drunken entrance through one of them, at which point the prearranged plan was for me to climb out another window, go to the public telephone, and call the cops. Occasionally I would climb back in and get to the bedroom with my older brother, but most of the time, I simply stood outside and waited for the police to escort me in as they escorted my father out. It was all very confusing for us, because we were being asked by one parent to betray another and then watch as he was often restrained with significant physical force. Many of our bungalow nights were spent in this manner.

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Our family poverty made us eligible for free meals at school that were paid for by the welfare services. This provided us with considerable motivation to attend school, but the drunken chaos inflicted by my father, most often in the early hours of the morning, meant that for a good part of the time, our nerves were shot, and our physical strength was sapped. Sitting in the warmth of the classroom with a full belly of government food, bone tired from the late-night family wars, I often found it almost impossible to stay awake in class. I would frequently be caught nodding off and not paying attention by impatient teachers who were trying to teach me but were utterly oblivious as to the cause of my tiredness.

I'll never forget until the day I die the math teacher who frequently beat my hands while proclaiming, "Stupid boy! You'll never amount anything, just like your father."

In retrospect, I can see now why the teachers thought I was lazy and uninterested. The monotonous repetition of schoolwork, especially math, rendered it impossible for me to keep my eyes open, which led to the inevitable *whack* with a ruler across my ear or hand. With each rude awakening, a battle of wills would ensue, which was probably quite entertaining for the other students.

"Out in front, McClinton!" the math teacher would bark in academic rage. I would proceed red-faced to the front of the room while the classroom laughed and enjoyed my plight yet again. "Stretch your hand out, boy!" the teacher commanded. My eyes would catch his for just a moment as I straightened my arms and turned my palms skyward for the unmerciful beating that was coming. In that brief

moment of eye contact, the teacher conveyed both the threat of punishment without compassion and yet also a plea for me to show some sort of contrition so that he could offer mercy without weakness. He learned over time that there would be no contrition from me, for I equated being sorry with personal weakness, and when one is already at the bottom of the societal ladder, weakness is not an option. The teacher knew from experience that while he was about to punish me physically, I was about to emotionally humiliate him.

*Thwack!* came the first blow from the expertly wielded cane to my outstretched fingers. Instantly, as sure as you can throw a light switch on and off, I was able to turn off the pain as if nothing had happened. I never flinched or blinked nor looked away from the teacher's eyes. Not only did I smirk at the teacher to mock him, but I also raised my hands higher to invite the next blow just to spite him even more.

Blow after blow landed as a line of white welts began to appear across my hands. I smiled, and he beat me. I smiled more and raised my hands higher, and he beat me some more. He kept searching my eyes, looking for some sign of submission, only to be disappointed each time. After several blows, his enthusiasm would begin to wane as he realized that he was not going to get the response from me that he desired. It was apparent to all who watched that while I got the beating externally, he got the beating psychologically.

This particular teacher would administer what he called "six of the best," which meant six vicious strikes with the cane. Even though I endured this punishment in such a way as to embarrass him, in reality, the real damage was occurring to my own mind and spirit. I saw no mercy in him, and I would give none back—now or in the future. I steadfastly refused to ever learn one single thing from my math teacher, and to this day, I have trouble with anything except the most basic of math functions, even though I am fully educated.

We couldn't do anything about teachers, but it was soon common knowledge to the other students that my brother and I were not to be trifled with. We were not about to ignore the taunts of "your dad's in jail; your dad's in jail," because it was a well-known fact that the two poorly dressed brothers from the bungalows were street fighters with a chip on their shoulder. In fact, I had a chip on both shoulders.

My brother had taken a Charles Atlas bodybuilding course, and every evening, he booted me from his room while he went through his exercise routine. Never one to be outdone, I joined the Thirty-First Boys' Brigade, which was down on Shore Road by an area called Green Castle, just across from the old Lido Cinema. Along with the religious activity of the group, there was a period of physical training on Thursday nights, which became one of the favorite times of the week for me. I couldn't afford the proper athletic shoes, but the floor of the boys' brigade hall was smooth wood, allowing me to participate in all the exercises, such as vaulting.

The instructor would line us up left or right, starting with the tallest. Being one of the smallest boys, I would always end up at the end of the line. The rest of the boys would all be dressed out in white shorts, vests, and athletic shoes. The two boys next to me were from a rich family, and they would smirk at me, nudging each other as I lined up with my bare feet. The smirks would disappear, though, once the exercises began, because the rich kids lacked the courage and skill to do the vaults properly. They would merely run and jump to the other side, while the older or more skilled boys would hit the springboard hard and do a flip and roll over the vault. Being the smallest and youngest of everyone there, the older boys would cheer me on as I sprinted the length of the floor and launched from the springboard with confidence, soaring off the other side, executing a double roll onto the heavy mat and into the arms of my cheering admirers. The snooty brothers would shrink with envy when this exercise was done at the annual display that was held yearly, where our parents could watch what we had learned.

It was during this time of life that I got my first job. "Son, there's an after-school job available at Bertie Ramsey's grocery store, if you're interested. He's paying ten shillings per week," Mom informed me as I walked through the door. I would end up working there for four years as the message boy just across Shore Road at the Parkmount Flats complex. Work at the shop was very hard, and I would start every day right after school at 4:30 p.m. and work until the store closed at 6:30 p.m. I would clean up the shop, mop the floor, and arrange the produce on the shelves. Cleaning up the shop consisted of sorting bags of "blues" and "whites" (potatoes), prepping cauliflower by cutting off the long outer leaves, cleaning the shelves, and getting the store ready to open the next morning.

On certain days—usually Fridays—customers would place written orders for large boxes of groceries, which I would then personally carry all the way up Parkmount Hill to the Parkmount and Downview housing estates. I knew my customers quite well and began to cater to their personal preferences. This gained me their respect and resulted in a yearly Christmas bonus that they placed into my dirty and blistered hand. I had truly begun to learn the satisfaction of honest work and its subsequent rewards. For the first time in my life, I found myself somewhat financially empowered. I gave my mother more than half of my pay and began to save what was left of my riches. By today's standards, it doesn't seem like much, but in those days, one shilling would take me to the movies and top it off with ice cream.

Being a teenager, I began to experience the changes in my body that all adolescent boys endure, including the fact that I began to notice girls. Although it was strange and confusing to me, needless to say, I made it through this time just like every other boy and emerged into post-adolescence feeling more grown up and with a deeper voice as proof.

The young man lives  
And breathes a sigh,  
And moths turn into butterflies.

My older brother had begun to hang out at the numerous dance halls found all around Belfast, and even though he tried to discourage me from tagging along—sometimes even physical discouragement—eventually he succumbed to my persistence, and I began to tag along with him and his teenage friends to these local hangouts.

## 1961: Dancing, Drinking, and Girls

In the heady days of the early 1960s, you could find a place to dance almost every night, often at social centers called "hops." The more formal coat-and-tie functions were usually on Friday or Saturday night. Davy, my older brother named after our dad, had already secured a reputation as a hard street fighter, a ladies' man, and a good "jiver."<sup>17</sup>

My history of big brother worship continued into my teenage years as I followed Davy into street fights and onto the dance floor. Although I copied his walk, the way his shoulders moved, and his style of dancing, I was never able to reach his level of prowess as a fighter. My brother had a combination of Mom's tenacity coupled with the muscle he had acquired over time by following the Charles Atlas bodybuilding course. There were very few boys of his age in North Belfast who could take him on. Even many of the older boys were reluctant to go a round with my brother. This fact just caused the chip on my shoulder to grow even bigger as I attempted to live up to his reputation.

Where I was lacking with my fists, I compensated with tactics and viciousness. When I fell short in body weight and size, I would equalize the battleground with pipes, bats, sticks, or any other blunt instrument within my reach. I did whatever I had to do to get by, because there was no other choice.

I also discovered about this time that the young ladies were pretty interested in me. Knowing this gave me the self-confidence to begin pursuing the opposite sex. After a time of heart-pounding

experimentation, I soon had all the experience I needed to begin my conquest of the female species.

It was at this point that a demon came to visit: alcohol. I would run around with my brother and his older gang friends as we frequented the local bars. There we would order rounds of drinks for everyone, which, of course, included me, even though I was a minor. I really didn't find the smooth amber liquid to be as pleasant or fun as everyone pretended it was. The warm feeling in the pit of my belly would give way to a kind of depression that quickly turned into feelings of violence. I was what people commonly call a "mean drunk." I developed what could only be called a "Jekyll-and-Hyde" response to alcohol, which transformed me from a fun-loving, lighthearted friend into a violent, vicious monster seeking to avenge the ghosts of my past on any unlucky person close enough to be my victim.

In January of 1961, my father made a brief foray into normalcy once more. He "quit" drinking again and made a tearful commitment to my reluctant but lonely mother, who eventually allowed him to move in with us at the bungalow. He did his short-lived best to become a father and husband by remaining sober and working hard while my mother became pregnant with her fourth child. Overall, things were looking pretty good, until one Friday night, Big Davy showed up to break my mother's heart.

Mom had made dinner, but Dad never appeared to eat it, which gave us that sick "here-we-go-again" feeling down in the pit of our stomachs. It turned out that Dad had gotten paid for the week, met up with some old drinking buddies, and proceeded to the bar to dispose of his wages. We went to bed that night with a thick tension in the air that reminded us of the old days.

We waited nervously for the first sounds of hobnailed boots coming up the sidewalk, which would inevitably preclude demands to be let in met by a stubborn woman's refusal to comply. The drunk showed up, and the knock came, but to my surprise, Mom just let Dad in. Big Davy, the drunken tyrant, was in for a change of tactics much to his surprise, and tonight would not be like all the other nights.

In the living room of our prefab bungalow sat my inebriated and hot-tempered father. When he raised his eyes to make his usual demands for food or simply to terrify someone in the house, his gaze fell upon a very different scene than that of the past. There in the

corner stood my street fighter older brother without a hint of fear, and next to him was my mother, whose squinted, intense stare betrayed the pain of years of beatings, abandonment, and rejection. Big Davy paled slightly and began an attempted bluff to regain his dominant role, which may well have succeeded, until he heard my voice declare without compassion or feeling, "I am locking the door."

Dad lunged at my mother, only to be met with a headbutt from my brother, which sent the stout drunk straight to the ground. That's when I hit him with a cricket bat<sup>18</sup> dead square in the head with only his cloth cap saving his skull from being crushed. I was about to deliver another blow when my mother and brother rushed over to wrestle the bat from my hands, visibly disturbed by the level of intensity on my face and demonstrated in my actions.

As my father's sobriety began to return, helped along by his throbbing skull, I heard my brother quietly and coldly tell him, "You are leaving our home for good. If you ever come back, you will die." Big Davy looked at my brother as if to judge the level of his resolve and then looked over at me and finally at my mother. He turned and hurriedly exited, never to return to our home.

Mom had a baby boy that October, who was raised in a fatherless home—just as we had been—but one with a lot of togetherness and love.

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School days for my brother and me were full of conflict brought on by that especially cruel taunting that only children are capable of. They would dance around us on the schoolyard and in the hallways, tormenting us with, "Your old man's in jail; your old man's in jail..." That theme, in a variety of flavors, became the steady diet of our entire school experience. We were enrolled in no less than fourteen different schools during our nomadic adolescence in Belfast, and the facts about our family situation were never long to be discovered by the other kids.

We were unwittingly taught by our peers that in order to have peace amongst our persecutors and tormentors, we had no choice but to deal out a dose of instant violence. We had proof of its effectiveness, because frequently, another kid whose attention we had gotten would stride up to us with a peace offering of candy or other



goody. One by one, they went from teasing us to trying to be our friends. It was regretful that we learned fear and terror got the results we were looking for.

Later in our lives, this lesson would not be forgotten. It became an ingrained personal philosophy: might makes right, and weakness gets what it deserves. I came to believe that I had to fight, literally, for anything in life that I wanted. Violence became a way of life that lasted until God rescued me from it in 1979.

For me, the tumultuous school life was about to end. It was 1962, and I was going to turn fifteen years old, which was the legal age I could quit school and begin working. I couldn't leave school fast enough, even though I had no educational qualifications and was semiliterate at best. I had one wish: to be a laborer. What ambition! I left school one Friday and began work the next Monday, thus fulfilling my entire life's goal in one weekend. School wasn't just "out for the summer"—it was out forever as far as I was concerned.

To this day, the painful memories of school have kept me from ever going back to visit any of the schools I attended. It was only much later in my life, by God's grace, that I ever came to understand the benefit of a proper education and a long-term commitment to learning.

## 1962–1964: The Laborer

*“...In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread...”*

One Friday, I was a student at Dunlambert School, and the following Monday, I was a boy worker at the Belfast concrete works. In a weekend, I went from one phase of life to the next.

The work was hard, and hard men were produced by the work. I was assigned to the pipe section of concrete works, making cement cylinders for use in underground drainage systems. My task was to transport the freshly made pipes, still in their metal molds, from the production area over to the warehouse floor, where a coworker finished the edges of the still-wet cement and removed the mold. What was left was a military-like formation of concrete soldiers in a perfect line to dry and harden until ready for use.

I can't help now but to see the parallels of my work to my life at that time, as I was being molded, shaped, and hardened into what I would become later: a person within whom every drop of faith in the human race had been dried out, like moisture being cured from the cement pipes. Like those pipes, I would eventually reach a point in my life where the only useful place Kenny McClinton belonged was six feet under ground.

At Concrete Works, I manned a two-wheeled steel cart that was topped with a square frame and two long steel shafts for pushing and pulling. On the front, there were two pieces of protruding angle iron that were used to slide up under the rim of the steel molds that contained the cement pipes. After levering the new pipe off the

molding machine, I would pull it away from the machinery, push it to the front of my cart, and then wheel it across the factory floor. It was very hard work and, at the time, the only work I was qualified to perform. I understood perfectly well that “no work” meant “no food,” so I worked. Intense manual labor, monotony, and lack of advancement opportunity began to do its work toward making me a hardened man.

About six months after starting my career as a “cement structure transport engineer,” my older brother, who worked at the large timber sawmill, informed me that the Ulster Timber Company was hiring. The pay wasn’t quite as good, but at least I would get to breathe fresh air and not cement dust all day. In those days, there was plenty of work for laborers, so it wasn’t uncommon to change jobs over the course of a day. One morning, I went to work at the cement factory and that night went home employed at the sawmill. I was especially excited about the move, because it meant that I could be around my brother, Davy, again.

I worked hard and was quickly promoted to a new position, where I went from sweeping floors to working a saw. I would cut timber and pile on little “bogies,” which were trailer-like structures that travelled on train rails, linking the entire sawmill together. When a bogie was loaded, two men pushed it away, and a crane or forklift would transfer the lumber to waiting trucks that were on their way to a building site. I would fill up a bogie, watch it get pushed away, and then begin again as an empty bogie took its place. This was my work repeated over and over, day after monotonous day.

The work was routine, but you had to be alert for danger all the time. Wood can splinter as it is being cut and shoot off the blade, like a deadly spear or dart. When hardwood from the Burma jungles was being cut, the band saw blades would suddenly bite into a bullet leftover from World War II, sending the screaming snapping band roaring through the air. Every worker immediately hit the deck in self-preservation lest they met an instant and gruesome death. The careless or slow were often not rewarded with a second chance.

As another year passed, I began to wonder if this was all there was to life. I met a fellow worker during this time named Pud, who was obviously as bored as I was. He was great fun to hang out with, and we would go to dances or out drinking several nights a week at all

the local working-class nightspots. We did everything together, including meeting beautiful girls, getting into gang fights, and occasionally we actually got around to dancing.

One day Pud said something to me that would prove to have far-reaching consequences. “Kenny, I’ve got a good idea,” he announced. “We don’t have to stay at this boring job. We can go down to the British Shipping Federation recruitment office and sign up for the Merchant Navy Training School. We can be sailors, travel all over the world, meet girls, get paid, and grab a suntan while we’re doing it!”

I thought for moment about this proposition. “I think that’s the perfect idea!” I decided. My agreement had an ulterior motive, however. Pud had just gotten a new Honda 90 motorcycle, and I knew that if I agreed to go with him, I would get a ride on it to the recruitment office in downtown Belfast.

It turned out that Pud was three months too old to join, so he went back home while I joined merchant navy! That one good idea and motorbike ride determined how I would spend the next twelve years of my life.

When the enlistment papers arrived in the mail, my mother launched into a tantrum. “You are *not* going away to sea, Kenneth! You cannot leave home. I will not hear of it!”

It took me a while to win the argument, and only a bit of shrewdness finally won the day, leaving my mother with a choice between the lesser of two evils as I said, “Okay, it’s either join the navy or let me buy a motorcycle. Your choice, but I am going to do one or the other.”

My mom evidently knew me better than I knew myself, because she discerned that my recklessness would most likely get me killed roaring down a highway on a motorcycle. Having allowed herself to be baited into a “one-or-the-other” proposition, she reluctantly allowed me to join the navy.

Tearfully, she signed the papers, and plans were made for me to go to England to train as a merchant navy seaman. At the ripe old age of seventeen, I was off to begin a new phase of life—a phase that I desperately hoped would bring the happiness I longed for.

## 1964: Seaman Training

I boarded the ferry for Liverpool, England, only after an emotional send off that left my mother crying, my older brother and I shaking hands, my younger sister clinging to my neck, and my baby brother begging for me not to leave. I made a mental note to avoid such emotional situations in the future.

I made my way into the ship's lounge, which was a large square room with seating up and down the length of it and a bar in the center. Like a bug drawn to light, I headed straight for the bar and ordered a pint of beer, securing my seat for the trip across the Irish Sea to England. The engines fired up, and we slipped out of the Belfast port and into the open water, our next stop being the home of the rock band The Beatles.

I couldn't sleep and spent the night out on the deck. As morning approached, I could see the lights of Liverpool, like tiny fireflies on the horizon, growing larger with each moment. My excitement grew as well, and my heart pounded as I wondered what this new day would bring.

Since there wasn't a Beatle anywhere to be found, I made my way over to the Lime Street Railway Station and boarded a train for the southeast to a small place called Sharpness, which was home to the Vindicatrix Training School, not far from the Bristol Channel. The train ride was a thrill as I drank in all the new sites that flew past the windows.

Arriving at Sharpness, I asked a young local girl how to get to the school for seamen.

"What?" she replied.

"Could you tell me the way to the sea training school?" I repeated.

"You what?" she answered again with a confused look. I realized then that my thick Ulster accent wasn't going to set well with English ears. Finally, I was able to slowly communicate my question and flashed her my best "helpless-lost-boy" smile. This did the trick, because she spent the next half hour personally escorting me to the school and then seemed genuinely reluctant to let me go once we arrived.

The navy school was constructed like an old World War II camp, filled with buildings similar to the Nissen hut I had lived in as a child. Each would contain twenty or so aspiring sailors from all walks of life. I felt like I was at the tower of Babel, because I couldn't understand most of what these guys said, and I was quite sure they were equally confused by my dialect—all of which lent itself to an impressive array of confusion.

Even with the communication difficulties, some things in life never change. I still recognized three basic types of people at the school: victors, victims, and those who are cunning or unprincipled enough to win the favor of the victors and get them on their side. It wasn't long before I found myself engaged in familiar territory.

"Wough ye frame then?" asked a big red-haired Scottish lad. I wasn't so much worried about what he was actually asking ("Where are you from?") as to *how* he was asking me this question, in full view and earshot of all the other guys. I rose up to my tallest stature, stuck out my chin, and, in my most belligerent manner, replied, "What's that got to do with you?" I was going to prove a point to everybody watching as I took a step toward him, increasing the obvious nature of my challenge. The big Scot stood down and backed up a pace, relegating himself to the hopeful friend of a victor, probably without even understanding what had just occurred. With a smile and a changed tone of voice, he said, "Sure, only asking, mate. Welcome to the hut." With that, he offered his handshake, which, of course, I responded to with the necessary hesitation that reinforced my dominance over the situation and only then finally giving him my strongest handshake in return.

At that point in my life, I couldn't spell the word *psychological*, but I certainly was no dummy when it came to understanding what psychological battles were. I made sure from day one that I wouldn't be hearing, "Your old dad's in jail," from any recruit at this station. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't keep the song from playing on privately in my own head. The ghosts of my past didn't recognize or seem to care that I was moving on with my life. The ghosts had set up shop in my mind and weren't going away peacefully any time soon.

My newfound Scottish friend didn't seem to mind that I immediately claimed the bottom bunk, which was the best bed in such confined quarters, offering more privacy and easy access. He had worked to establish himself at the top of the pecking order in our hut, but in one brief moment of psychological dominance, I had placed myself over him permanently.

While many of the other men suffered from homesickness, the next twelve weeks of training passed quickly for me as I knuckled down to apply my work ethic to the seamanship lessons. It surprised me to realize that even though I was missing the educational qualifications, it did not mean that I was unintelligent. Up to that point, I had resigned myself to the fact that "no education" was equal to "stupidity" and had settled in my own mind that this was my lot in life. I had come to believe that what was true in the past would be true in the future.

Despite my childhood school experiences, I came to realize during seamen's training that a lack of education didn't mean lack of intelligence. I found that I was more than capable of grasping and learning the art of the sailor. My mind was sharp, and I discovered that I had very high memory retention. I could watch my instructor do something one time, and my mind would immediately "record" it in such a way that I could not only remember it but often could remember it in a manner in which I could perform it easier and more efficiently.

I learned how to tie knots, splice ropes, and make loops, or "eyes," in the end of ropes ranging in size from half an inch to huge ropes called "hawsers" made of hemp or, later on, polypropylene. These hawsers were used to pull the ships alongside the shore by looping them over huge metal bollards.<sup>19</sup> In the days before modern

technology, seamen did this work by hand, and I found that I was an able student of these skills.

The name of our training school was the Vindicatrix and was located at Sharpness in Gloucester, England. The name came from an old-ship-now-classroom that lay down in the canal along Bristol Channel. We were informed that the Vindicatrix was one of the first steel sailing ships manufactured sometime during the mid-nineteenth century. The hull was steel, but it still had good old-fashioned wooden decks and sails.

Cargo holds were now classrooms with tar-covered decks for a roof. The masts had long since been chopped down to stubs, leaving just enough to remind visitors of its once-glorious past. Tons of cement poured into her bowels had settled the ship onto the channel floor, giving new life to a vessel that had long since been rendered obsolete by modern technology.

Each of the twelve training weeks brought a new subject: ropes, knots, compasses, etc. We were continually assessed and graded as to our potential usefulness as a seaman. Physical strength was emphasized and developed, as any able-bodied sailor had to be able to hoist himself up a mast on a bo'suns<sup>20</sup> chair or across a ship's rigging. The school had secured the services of a British army paratrooper to motivate our physical training, which usually occurred early in the freezing cold morning out in the drill yard.

The training sessions had a remarkable effect on young men who were typically in the prime of their physical development, and the change in our skinny physiques was soon evident. This increase in muscles, aggressiveness, and testosterone set the scene for problems in the close confines of ship life.

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Living in such cramped quarters called for strict social control at all times, if any sense of order and civility was to exist. Without diligence, chaos can quickly overtake a group of men living like sardines in a giant steel can. To deal with the inevitable frustrations, the staff at the Vindicatrix created what was known as the "grudge fight."

The grudge fight was held in an old canvas boxing ring at the recreation hall and went something like this: Two students who just



couldn't get along on a day-to-day basis would, at the staff's discretion, have a grudge fight arranged for them.

If both parties agreed to it, they would meet publicly to slug out their frustrations after one week of preparation. They would enter the recreation hall in shorts and vests, in full view of the entire training corps, as they donned boxing gloves to settle their differences.

The fight was like any other boxing match with a couple of modifications: There was a referee but no timed rounds, and the two combatants would have at it until someone conceded. Afterward, the referee would declare a winner, compel a mandatory handshake, and declare public reconciliation for the entire camp to witness.

The grudge fight went a long way toward dissipating the natural aggression of the young men in training, although it did not alleviate bullying or oppression totally.

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At week eight of our training, we were administered the Lifeboat Certification Examination, which measured our proficiency during an emergency at sea. For insurance purposes, all seamen had to have a lifeboat Certificate of Proficiency. This made week seven a stressful time of preparation but one with incentives. If a high score was achieved on the examination, it would result in a promotion to a trainee bo'sun or bo'suns mate, which came with perks and recognition.

The certification exam was almost entirely oral and hands-on, with very little reading and writing, giving me the opportunity to score excellent marks, which I did. This was confusing for me, even shocking, because I had been long convinced that I was stupid and would never amount to anything—"just like your father!" The confusion wasn't near enough to damper my happiness as I looked forward to my promotion.

The first day on duty as bo'sun's mate brought me crashing back to reality. My new duties involved supervising the other trainees as they lined up on the quay,<sup>21</sup> preparing to march up the gangway<sup>22</sup> of the *Vindictrix* three times a day to eat chow. The process involved six sailors at a time proceeding in groups so that the meals would be orderly and disciplined. I stood at the foot of the gangway to count off six at a time—a simple enough duty, you would think.

“One, two, three, four, five, six.” I counted bodies as they scurried up the ramp, at which point my hand would come down, blocking the line until the next batch was sent.

I counted off again, but this time I was challenged by an English fellow with a thick Cockney accent, “Hey, Paddy. That was only five.” The big muscular Englishman glared at me, stressing the “Paddy” to accentuate the derogatory nature of the name while his four mates laughed contemptuously.

I tried to laugh off my embarrassment. “No, that was six,” I replied.

“What’s a matter, Paddy? Can’t count to six? Are you stupid?” he taunted. I tried my best to let it go and ignore him, but my childhood ghosts came calling, and something deep within me was stirred. At the moment that I was about to unleash my response on him, the physical trainer paratrooper, who had witnessed the whole scene, made a timely entrance. He sent the Cockney boy to the end of the line and went to speak with him there. I was informed later that day that my fellow trainee was challenging me to a grudge fight that would take place in one week—a challenge I gladly accepted.

I spent the entire week preparing for the fight with the help of my big Scottish bunkmate, who had long since become a firm friend of mine—running, skipping rope, stretching, and sparring—all while listening to everyone around us speculate on the outcome of the match. It seemed that I had been branded the underdog, and even my training partner showed the same doubts about my chances. What no one could see, though, was how the ghosts of my pasts were gearing up to avenge the insults from the Englishman that so reminded me of my childhood.

Fight night arrived, and I found myself in the recreation hall playing pool. One of the Englishman’s friends decided to inform me that my apology would be accepted if I wanted to avoid the beating I was about to receive in the ring. My mind immediately returned to the math teacher who could elicit no remorse or sympathy from me, even while beating my hands raw. No, there would be no apology or any sign of backing down from Mr. Cockney, English tormentor. I told him to inform the Brit that I was going to punch holes all through him and that he would have no place to hide nor any place to run once we got in the ring.

Entering the ring, my skinny, wiry frame—clad in boxing shorts and gloves—deceptively hid the true nature of what I was about to unleash on my unsuspecting victim. All the years of insults, teasing, and humiliation had come together in the perfect storm that was about to find its way out of my body through my fists. I actually felt a twinge of shame knowing what I was about to inflict on my opponent—he stood no chance against me and the hundred ghosts fighting on my behalf.

I looked intensely across the ring at my bigger, more muscular opponent as a deadly calm encompassed me. I smiled in contempt for him in his nice new white vest and running shoes—the guy who insulted me and often used his size to bluff and bully those he perceived as weaker. He would not bluff his way out this time. He was trapped, and as his eyes met mine, I knew that he now understood what I already knew was the outcome. *Clang!* The only bell this fight would hear sounded, and fear leaked from the Englishman's eyes.

I practically ran across the ring and landed several immediate blows with my gloved fists, hitting him so hard I could feel the reverberation all the way into my shoulders. Anger and shame fuelled my muscles. Heartache and misery hardened my fists. Embarrassment and humiliation solidified my resolve. *Thud! Thud! Thud!* Punches rained down in fury on the poor guy. He crumpled to the canvas and refused to get up as silence descended on the entire school audience. They had accurately perceived that this bout was not just a simple sporting event anymore.

Ironically, it was a sour victory. I felt the familiar shame that was there when I hit my dad with the cricket bat and was prepared to hit him over and over again or when I had humiliated Big Jack at the boys' home. The feelings of triumph were being quenched, but there was still enough satisfaction to placate my ghosts of the past for the time being, and so they receded into my subconscious to await their next summons.

The referee-paratrooper formally raised my hand in victory while looking strangely and sympathetically into my eyes, seeing far too much sadness and pain for one so young. There was no victory celebration that night, nor would there ever be—this would be the one and only time I was part of a Vindicatrix grudge fight. The other

trainees got the message, and I was not the target of anyone's insults from that day forward.

I finished my training with top marks in the lifeboat certification and later in the seaman's certification. I was ready to be a sailor in the merchant navy, but was the navy ready for me?

## 1964–76: Navy Life

*“...They that go down to the sea in ships...”*

It wasn't long until I would find out. In the latter months of 1964, I was dishonorably discharged from a passenger ship called the *Southern Cross* after sailing around the world. I received the captain's DR stamp<sup>23</sup> after ruining a promising start with too much liquor, fighting, and fraternization.

On my first trip to sea, I disgraced myself by indulging in too much of anything even loosely labeled “personal pleasure”—be it revelry, drunkenness, or just plain selfishness. I think I became one of the few deck boys ever to receive the dreaded DR stamp on a first trip out. It would take a long time to recover from the setback in my goal to obtain the required “very good” stamp from the captain in my sea book.

I saw the problem as one of underemployment. I had been trained as a seaman, a sailor—and I took that training very seriously. As soon as I boarded, ready to put my skills to work, I was immediately assigned duty as a “Peggy.” A Peggy was a young deck boy who pulled duty in a mess hall for sailors. That's right. I was a glorified busboy—a very unhappy and insulted glorified busboy. I washed dishes, mopped floors, and served food to “real” sailors. How I detested my situation.

The disillusionment of being assigned sissy girl work (or so I viewed it) killed all the aspirations I had built up at the sea training school. As I sunk lower into self-pity and depression, I turned to the bottle for comfort and escape. Life had thrown me a curve that I was not ready or capable of dealing with, and I found myself rebelling

against the ship's authority in a manner so wild, I even surprised myself.

I embarked on twelve miserable years of international sea travel, which gave me opportunity to plumb the depths of human depravity. I can see now that God gave me over to my wickedness so that I might taste depravity and turn from the rottenness of my sin.

There is no glory to God in recounting the darkness of my sinful behavior, but it helps illuminate the extent to which God went in order to save a vile sinner like me. So with that in mind, I'll recount a few things that happened.

After what seemed to be an eternity as a deck boy, I moved to junior ordinary seaman, then senior ordinary seaman, certified efficient deckhand, and, three years later, able-bodied seaman. For a short time, I was made bo'sun. All during this time, I lived an embarrassingly loose life, placing no limits on my immorality. My habit of "instant violence" was always nearby, and I never missed a chance to fight to get what I wanted. I lived a life of personal violence to achieve my desires, and with each incident, it became more ingrained in my mind that this was the only way to "get yours" in life. Violence and immorality became normal for me—so normal that I was incapable of seeing how pathetic that approach to life really was.

I travelled around the world, working all over ships, climbing masts, getting lowered down in cargo holds, and scrubbing decks. I worked hard, fought hard, drank hard, and played hard. Nothing was off limits to me, and I made sure to test that principle.

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The winter of 1965 found me on the ship Carrigan Head, which belonged to the headline shipping company. We had sailed from Belfast to Liverpool to get a cargo of Scotch whiskey bound for Montreal, Canada. Thanks to the cargo, I remember very little about the trip. Somehow I got through it, though, collected my wages back in Belfast, and went looking for some city fun.

Seamen are often loners with a lot of acquaintances but few real friends. I went to visit a few of the bars downtown to see whom I might run into but really had no one to share my time with. The throbbing music from the big plaza ballroom dance on Chichester Street caught my attention, so I headed in. The place was really

jumping with young people, dancing, and Del Shannon hits. I was eighteen years old and feeling right at home, hungry for some adventure.

I caught a couple of dances with some lonely-looking females and stood awhile at the edge of the wooden floor, drinking in the excitement of the dancers. My eyes fell onto two beautiful girls who appeared to be without guys, as they were dancing with each other. I made my way over to check them out.

Both girls were pretty, but it was the taller of the two that caught my attention. There was just something about her that appealed to a deeper set of emotions in me. If I wasn't feeling "love at first sight," it must have been close, because all of sudden, everything seemed perfect. I was immediately captivated by her.

The current song ended, but the two girls stayed on the floor, signaling that they wanted to dance to the next song. I had no intentions of breaking them up and sending one girl off the floor alone, so I proceeded over, took both of their hands, and began to dance with each of them. This act of confidence surprised them at first, but after figuring out there would be no other male joining us, they laughed it off and began to enjoy the dance with me.

A number of the other dancers noticed us and stopped dancing. They began to form a ring around us to watch this confident, jiving sailor handle two girls at once. People clapped their hands and encouraged us. The girls giggled with delight, enjoying the outrageous and daring move I had made by assuming both of them would dance with me. I had made a good impression on everyone—most especially these two pretty girls.

I finally got their names, and the taller was Carla. I asked if I could walk her home, and after some hesitation, she finally agreed. Carla lived a few blocks south of city hall in an area called Donegal Pass at the bottom of Ormeau Road. Her dancing friend lived in my old area, Shankill in West Belfast, so we got her a taxi as Carla and I set off on foot to her home.

It was a cold night, and I gladly made room in my heavy Canadian coat for Carla, unzipping it and wrapping her up with my arm. We walked, huddled and warm, all the way to her house. Reaching her

home, she allowed me to brush her lips with a light and tentative kiss. She blushed and smiled as my heart thoroughly melted for her.

I managed to ask if I could see her again. “Yes, that would be nice,” she replied, smiling that wonderful, unforgettable smile I would come to love. I was reduced to a giddy schoolboy, utterly starry-eyed and goo-goo over this woman.

This began a two-year courtship, which, for most people, would have ended in a happy marriage, but not for me. Through my own fault, I destroyed the relationship for both of us. It would take ten years for the full consequences to settle over the heartbreak, and for those ten years, misery would certainly love the company of Kenny McClinton.

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After meeting Carla and falling deeply in love with her, I continued to sail on merchant navy ship for two more years—but things were different now. I longed for Carla constantly, wanting to marry her and settle down with a family. I could finally see my chance to have a normal life, and it was all I could think about. Carla felt the same way toward me, and so I made the decision to trade in my sea legs and stay on shore.

There weren’t a lot of choices for me with regards to employment; sailors aren’t in big demand in a city. I was in love, but love wouldn’t put food on the table or pay for the white wedding Carla’s family required. There was a lot more to settling down that I had contemplated up to this point.

I ran across an old friend of mine, Big Billy, now the foreman at the Ulster Timber Company. We were having a beer one night when I told him of my need for work. He told me to come on down to the mill the next day, and he would see if he could get me started.

It so happened that their “slinger” had just been injured, and they needed someone to take his place. This was perfect for me. I would work on a mobile crane, climbing up high, handling steel wire ropes, slinging wire around cargo that was waiting to be lifted from one place to another. I was doing much of the same thing on many of the ships I worked on, so it took no time at all for me to catch on and get to work.



The following Monday, I became the official slinger on a fifteen-and-a-half-ton mobile crane that had been nicknamed the “Yellow Submarine”—an ironic name for an operator who had just left sea duty. For nine months, I worked that crane hard, loading trucks that were going to construction sites or filling transports with lumber that was going to sawmills for additional shaping and cutting.

Carla and I saved every penny we could, needing enough to satisfy her family’s expectation of a proper white wedding. I worked a full week on the yellow submarine, plus two nights and Saturday overtime, while Carla worked every shift she could get at the British vacuum cleaner factory. We didn’t mind the effort, because the goal was well worth the hardship. But that wonderful life that was at my fingertips would never come to fruition—disaster was waiting just around the corner, and of course, I would make sure it was invited in.

“All work and no play” worked its self-pitying ways on me, and I found myself once again turning to alcohol for escape. One Saturday, a few of us from the mill decided to stop off at a local bar for a couple of beers to relax. One drink led to another and another and still another—and the ghosts of my past came charging back. I was put sloppy drunk into a taxi and driven home, where my mother let me sleep it off on the couch. If only I could have slept it off without interruption, this story might have turned out differently—but “if only” didn’t happen.

Carla woke me from my drunken stupor, because I had forgotten about our date together that day. She was now standing over me, demanding to know why I had stood her up and what possibly could have made me forget about her. I finally regained consciousness to find Carla gripping the front of my shirt and yelling at me, “Just who do you think you are, standing me up? Look at you, you drunk fool. Do you think I want to go through life with a drunk?”

She was justly hurt for being stood up and, even worse, being stood up by someone so ridiculously drunk. She was even more hurt knowing that there was nothing in the world that would make me disappoint her when sober, so the reality was that I had chosen alcohol over our relationship. Screaming at a drunk with a history of violence is like yanking on a dog’s ears—it can only end up ugly. And this was not going to be the exception.

Before I could even begin to count the consequences, I bounded off the sofa and slapped Carla hard across the face, grabbed her by the hair, and heaved her out the door of the house! I continued to slap and beat her mercilessly all the way outside and then returned to slam the door closed on her. Only then did I suddenly realize what I had just done. I sobered up in record time.

I was immediately devastated and shocked at my actions against the one person I loved more than anything in life. The clock would not go backward, though—I had done what I had done. There was no taking it back. I rushed barefoot out the door to find Carla standing at the bus stop just down the road. I tried to put my arms around her and somehow remove what I had just done, but she panicked and screamed when I touched her. She was sobbing, dejected, and obviously scared out of her mind at the sight of me. Her cries brought a man from a nearby home over to see what was happening. This Good Samaritan would not receive a warm welcome.

“Mind your own business,” I told him. The innocent man did what most decent men would have done, trying to resolve the situation and protect a woman in trouble. He might have been successful if Carla would not have allowed him to put his arm around her and begin to lead her to his home where his concerned wife was waiting in the doorway. This was the worst rejection I could have ever imagined, and all hell broke loose in my emotions.

I turned my wrath and shame on the poor, good fellow and beat him relentlessly until he was cut and bloodied. Then I carried him into his house and threw him through his own kitchen window. In one last act of madness, I punched Carla square in the face and walked out. Passing by his garden, I plucked a single red rose and crushed it, thorns and all, until the blood ran from my hand.

I went home, washed up, put on clean clothes, and waited for the inevitable arrest that was coming. The police arrived to take me to jail, as expected. I believe now that it was that event that sealed my fate for the following decade of destruction that would be my life, and I admit that I had no one to blame but myself.

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“Does anyone have anything to say before I pass sentence?” the judge inquired. The magistrate of the Belfast court had heard all the

testimony concerning my drunken violence and had seen firsthand what I did to Carla, who was now wearing a full eye patch over her swollen purple face. She cried as she related the story and how the other man had only tried to help her.

I was fully expecting the prescribed eighteen months in jail for my sins until, much to my surprise, Carla stood up in defiance of her family and asked to address the court. She entered the witness box nervously and said, "Your Honor, I know this looks really bad, and I know that my fiancé acted horribly, but I just wanted to make a plea of leniency on his behalf."

My jaw dropped in surprise, as did everyone else's in the courtroom. Carla continued to describe how she loved me, even though she was hurt by my drunken behavior. She said that she didn't see sending me off to prison as a way to help and that it would only make it more difficult for her. She still wanted to marry me and settle down with a family, and with that, she begged the court to let me off with a stern warning.

My eyes filled up with tears as Carla sobbed her heart out to the judge. I could only think of how much I loved her and how sorry I was for what I had done.

Her pleas were heard, and the case ended with a suspended jail term and probation for me. If I could stay sober and out of trouble, then I would not go to jail. I was already convinced that was never going to be a problem again, because I loved Carla more than ever now, and I would *never* hurt her again.

Outside the courtroom, I hugged Carla and told her over and over how sorry I was and how nothing like this would ever happen again. I held her, kissed her face, and cried. I looked into her eyes and will never forget her next words:

"Kenny, I love you. I will never love anyone like I have loved you, but...I never want to see you again. What we had is over, and there is no going back." This was pronounced with such finality that I did not even attempt to persuade her otherwise. She meant it, and I knew it. It was over.

Her mother ushered her out, and my mother drove me home. I curled up on the couch, a ball of depression and heartache. I wanted to die. Part of me did.

From October to December of 1967, I tried over and over to get Carla to talk to me, but she would not have it. I would torture myself by visiting all of our favorite places, hoping to get a glimpse of her. I was utterly dejected and heartbroken. So I wound up doing the only thing left for me to do: escape.

On Christmas Eve, I sailed out of Belfast, bound for Jamaica, leaving the bitter cold of Ireland and the bitter cold of my broken heart.

### **Let the Heartaches Begin**

Home came the sailor, in search of some life,  
Home from the deep rolling seas;  
Ready to settle and take him a wife,  
One sweet and fair he could please.  
He met with a lass who was tender and warm.  
They knew it was love from the start.  
He abandoned the sea, with his love for to be  
Not knowing they'd both break his heart.  
Now the sailor tried hard to work on the land,  
To furnish his love with the best.

But his hopes were all damned as old fate took a hand,  
His poor sea-faring heart wouldn't rest.  
The sea called him at night, midst the moon's aerie light,  
It sighed and it moaned in his ears,  
"Oh please come back to me, I'm your first love, the sea—  
You've been with me for too many years!  
He just couldn't decide 'tween the girl and the tides,  
His heartstrings were torn either way.  
So he took to strong drink, trying hard not to think of  
The price that his heart had to pay.

It all came to a head one sad night, it is said,  
Through the haze of hot whiskey and beer;  
When a black rage he vent till frustration was spent—  
On the girl whom he loved oh so dear.  
He was taken to task, for no mercy he asked,  
A jail sentence was sure to occur!  
Till the girl took her stance, in her lover's defense,

And told of his love oh so rare.

With a caution and fine for the girl's peace of mind,  
He stepped with deep shame from the dock.  
So bewildered, they said, so confused in his head—  
Befuddled, agog, in cold shock!

The lass held him tight on that very same night,  
But her words brought the 'tar' to his knees:  
"Although I love you true, I will n'er marry you!"  
Thus she banished him back to the seas.  
Away sailed the sailor, so heavy in heart,  
Away to the deep rolling seas.

Once more all alone, with the oceans his home,  
And heartbreak that loathsome disease.

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton

## Time for a Change

*...Look not upon the wine when it is red...*

Proverbs 23:31–35

For an entire week, the crew of the *Crystal Bell* was stone drunk, having sailed from Belfast on Christmas Eve, 1967, bound for Jamaica to secure a load of sugar to be returned to a refinery in London.

I was in search of a belly full of Jamaican rum to escape the reality of what I had done to my life. Hard work and harder drinking would pass the days for me. Arriving back from Jamaica, the ship docked in London, and I collected my three months of accumulated wages. I immediately signed back on to head for Trinidad to secure another load of Caribbean nectar.

While I waited for the London longshoremen to unload the Jamaican cargo, I showered, shaved, and set out for the usual week of “fun” before setting sail to Trinidad. That week of riotous fun inevitably would leave me in a penniless stupor to prepare the now-empty ship for setting sail on the next voyage. I was not alone, though; most of the other sailors enjoyed the same lifestyle. Drunk or not, the seamen would fulfill their duties, and soon we were ready to leave the cold, foggy port, bound for the sun-drenched coasts of Trinidad.

Life at sea had brought a strange mixture of experiences and emotions. The drinking and revelry always brought with it an element of violence. This violence became a way of life for me—which I realize now must be hard for the average, decent person to comprehend or

understand. The violence was just normal for me; it's what I knew and was as real a problem for me as lying or cheating might become for someone else.

During my seafaring years, I received over two hundred surgical stitches to wounds inflicted by various weapons ranging from sticks to pipes to knives. I frequently carried a piece of pipe to offer persuasion to my fellow seamen who dared to see things other than the way I saw them. My shaved head was covered in scars and looked like a hand-drawn road map. My face had been cut and struck with knives, bottles, and other sharp objects. A fellow drunk rammed a crowbar all the way to the bone in my chin and left it hanging there as he sobered up enough to know to run for his life—a prudent choice considering what would have happened to both of us had I got my hands on him.

I'm ashamed now to remember inflicting some unmerciful damage on numerous adversaries, and I am the first to admit that most of the injuries I personally suffered were well deserved. My life was a mess. I was part-time alcoholic monster trying to escape pain by numbing it and dealing it out to others. I don't blame any of that on my childhood or family—I was what I was by choice, plain and simple. I made bad decisions and reaped what I sowed.

That was the negative side of my navy experience. On the other hand, I was blessed to experience some wonderful, beautiful things, at least from the perspective of what the world had to offer. I met amazing people, loved some incredible women, forged a few deep friendships, and saw many of the world's beautiful sights.

Yet nothing was lasting. The experiences would only end with every port call, and with each departure, a new emptiness needed to be filled again—usually with liquor. Having experienced over and over nearly all that a sinful world can offer, I had finally had enough of drinking, sin, and self-abuse. Life at sea had become raw and lawless, fast and furious, lonely and unfulfilling.

I left the merchant navy and went ashore to find a different and hopefully normal life—a life I desperately wanted before it was too late.

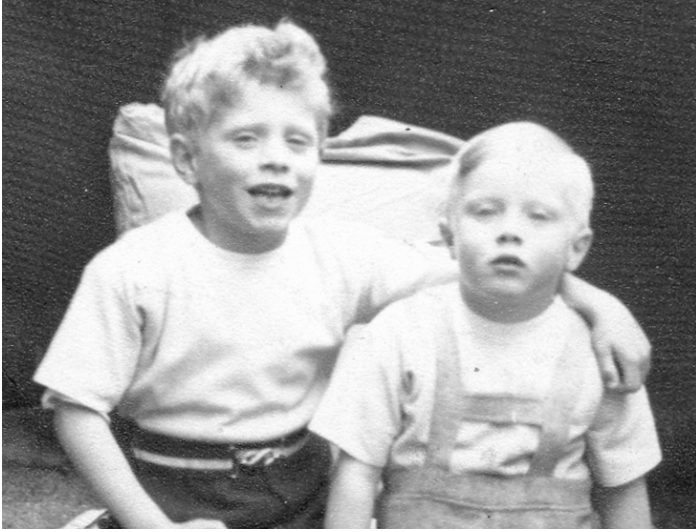
It was not to be. Predictably, I went from bad to worse, walking onshore right into the middle of widespread political upheaval in my

homeland of Ulster (Northern Ireland). There was a civil firestorm sweeping the country, and I would not go unscathed in the blaze.

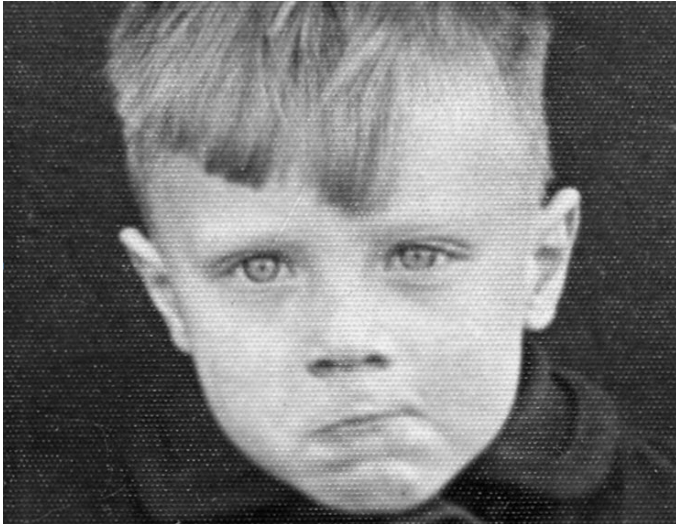
*Note: This chapter begins to get into the political history of Northern Ireland. If you would like a quick familiarization to help you better understand some of the events, take a moment to read the appendix in the back of the book.*



## Photo Gallery



Kenny and David, 1950.



Kenny in 1950, a child determined to face up to and face down  
all that a life of heartache could throw at him.



My father, Davy, and I in my grandfather's garden in Ardoyn, Belfast. The Protestants were later burned out of these houses in 1970–71. Taken at a time when my father had “signed the pledge” not to drink.



Mum, Catherine (left); me (center); Davy (right); and little sister, June Elizabeth (left front bottom). Taken while living in “the bungalow by the sea” (1957).



Kenny (left), Davy (center), with sister, June, in his arms while living in the bungalow by the sea, late 1950s.



Leaving the boys' home, 1957.



David and Kenneth in Park Lodge Welfare Home.



Kenny (left) with some of “the gang” from the bungalows in the Shore Road area. We were up the Cave Hill at the caves.



Kenny just about to leave Dunlambert School,  
age fifteen years, in early 1962.



Kenny at the sea school, England. Just got my lifeboat  
examination top marks star, 1964.



Kenny (centre) with some of my fellow seamanship students at the Sea School, 1964.



Kenny on a tramp steamer going through the Suez Canal.



Kenny (left) drinking in a brothel/bar in  
Manzanillo, Mexico, about 1970.





All hands on deck, in full work kit, somewhere at sea.



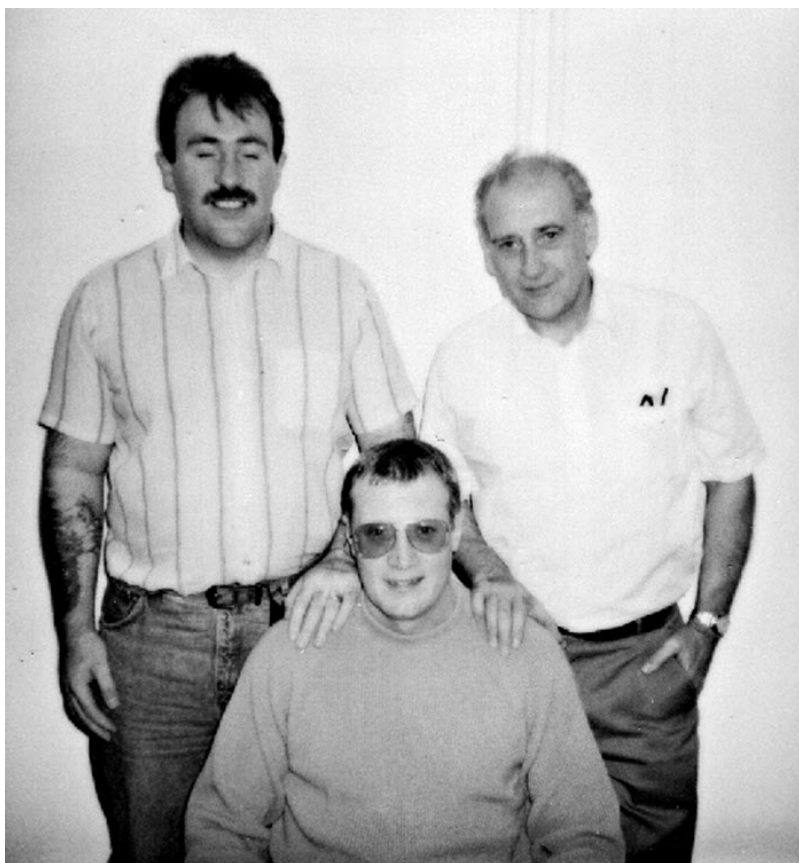
Kenny (left) in some fleshpot in Singapore.



Kenny painting a "no smoking" sign on the ship's bulkhead



Work, booze, rock and roll in the early/mid-1970s.  
Probably my last foreign-going trip to sea.



Kenny and ex-prisoners, Graham and Billy (now deceased), in Maghaberry Prison visits, about 1989–90.

## 1968: Troubles in Ulster

It's a long-standing argument as to when the conflicts, commonly called "the Troubles," began in Ulster (Northern Ireland). One opinion is that they resumed in 1968 when some nationalist Roman Catholics from North Belfast stoned a parade of youngsters—junior members of the Protestant Orange Order.<sup>24</sup> Others contend that the Troubles began when "the hated British" invaded and conquered old Ireland. Still another version is that it all began when the "hated Gaels" invaded from southern Europe around 700 B.C. and drove the native Irish<sup>25</sup> into the northern regions now known as Ulster.<sup>26</sup>

In truth, the cause of the Troubles is as complex and numerous as the Irish people themselves. It is my opinion that no single religion, political ideology, tribe, or locale has a monopoly on either the grievances and suffering or the perpetration of injury and violence. There have been rights and wrongs dished out and endured by all sides.

My own involvement began in 1947, being born into Irish poverty, neglected by pretty much all segments of society. My personal perception of the Troubles is just that: my perception. As with any person, I can only see things from my viewpoint of the world, and so my story follows those perceptions that are relevant in conveying my journey to you. This leaves me unable and unwilling to argue against another person's perception of the same events. I trust that readers from all sides will grant me the same consideration.

The Troubles crept into my consciousness during my last couple of years at sea. Roman Catholics, who had previously sailed the world with me, were growing noticeably more political during our drinking

sessions, exhibiting what amounted to a kind of “persecution complex” toward me as a Protestant. At that time, I entertained very little interest in politics, so I became, depending on my mood, either amused or annoyed at these Catholic fellows.

Why were they blaming me, a simple Protestant seaman, for things that happened a hundred years before I was even born? For certain, I was guilty of a lot of things, but a potato famine<sup>27</sup> was not one of them, especially one where equal numbers of Protestants and Catholics died. I soon lost my patience for the guilt-trip messengers and developed a common reply for it: either a hard slap on the chops or a little “tickle around the lug” with my trusty metal pipe.

Despite my efforts to the contrary, the apparently coordinated social change among the Catholic sailors toward the Protestant mates continued unabated. I often wondered about the hypocrisy of the anti-British Roman Catholics who had willingly chosen the British merchant navy as their employer.

Even far out at sea, the situation grew steadily worse onboard ship. The Catholic crew began to see and refer to themselves, as “Irish Nationalists,” singing old Irish rebel songs while huddling in secretive meetings in the cabins. An instant hush would come over them if a Protestant sailor approached. In response, Protestants began doing the same thing, striking up old Orange songs and holding exclusive Protestant drinking sessions.

There was very little to no understanding of the actual theological differences between Protestants and Catholics amongst us. For us, this was more like tribal loyalties originating by chance from what family we happened to be born into. These tribal loyalties were being manipulated by the power hungry to create heretofore nonexistent political differences that were fueled by Irish nationalism.<sup>28</sup> This nationalism fervor came in the form of a thirty-two-county United Ireland that was taught to walk in lockstep with the Roman Catholics. In other words, the Protestants wanted to have a part of Ireland (Northern) remain a part of Britain, but the Catholics were saying, “No British anywhere in Ireland, even if there are Irish (Protestants) that want them there.”<sup>29</sup>

This situation caused the separation of many previously solid Catholic-Protestant friendships, which exacted a personal price on top of the emotional stress. The close proximity of ship life made the

sectarian differences impossible to ignore. It was sad to see friends who had travelled the world together, gotten drunk together, fought together, and chased women together now suddenly divided, suspicious, and paranoid toward each other. The fighting, now often in groups, escalated on the ship.

During the early stages of these changes, stories began to filter onboard about a civil rights movement being organized by the working class of Northern Ireland. Having been born into poverty in that very land, I had already decided that they could count on my support for sure. From my viewpoint and experience, it seemed like the wealthy farmers and mill owners, whom we referred to as the “fur brigade,” had everything, while the working class lived in poverty. It came as no surprise that the poor had finally decided to rise up militantly for rights and equality.

It seemed like a simple issue of poor people banding together to get fair treatment and wages. However, things are seldom what they appear in Ulster society—not then, not in the late sixties, and not now.

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In what seemed to be an obviously coordinated manner, the civil rights gathering began to be attended by flag-waving groups of people. The gatherings themselves were nothing new in Ulster, but the waving of the green, white, and orange Republic of Ireland flag was certainly new. This flag was immediately identified as the flag of another state—a state that had separated itself from Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Ulster) by setting up a border that was patrolled on one side by the British Army and on the other side by the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

The working-class masses of Ulster wanted civil rights and fair employment. The nationalists of Southern Ireland were saying the way to get equality was to rebel against Britain and become a united Ireland. They wanted Northern Ireland (Ulster) to exchange British rule (Protestant) for Southern Irish rule (Catholic). We wanted equality and civil reform but had no interest in being the religious minority of a united Ireland—a situation that would very likely make things worse for us, not better.

The presence of flag-waving, politically motivated attendees caused the common working-class people to abandon the civil rights movement. The population of Ulster was “more loyal to Britain than the British,” and it was not our wish to rebel against England. The civil rights movement of the 1960s in Ireland was effectively hijacked by the IRA. During those years, the movement became increasingly militant and was dedicated almost exclusively to promoting the agenda of the Irish Catholic nationalist minority that lived in Northern Ireland.

The Protestant working class in Ulster felt utterly betrayed, and the opposing sides were quickly solidified. This atmosphere of mutual distrust birthed the first manifestations of what would become the organized Protestant resistance of Northern Ireland. These were the early social situations that would lead me into thirty-four years of murder, mayhem, and chaos.

I believe that the trauma, pain, and destruction runs so deep in Ulster to this day that only divine intervention by the Lord God himself will ever slam the lid on our Pandora’s box of troubles.

## 1970–74: The Early War Years

The early years of conflict in Northern Ireland were unique, missing the religious and political polarization that exists today. People of different religions socialized freely, and only in the most hard line areas of Belfast did a person of “the other religion” have anything to fear.

Around this time, I was living with a Roman Catholic divorcee, resulting in mutual horror for both of our families. Our apartment was in the Cliftonpark Avenue area of North Belfast, which had previously been home to the upper middle class but had gradually deteriorated into rundown apartments and student housing.

We housed among a strange variety of partiers, conmen, students, prostitutes, and “social vampires”—people who were rarely seen during the day and lived their lives primarily after sunset. As for me, nightfall would find me working in one of several well-known watering holes in North Belfast.

Back then, closing time was usually 10:00 p.m., and in some of the more lively bars, it was joked that the manager had to issue riot gear to the staff to help encourage the patrons to leave the premises. At one bar, it fell to the bartender to intervene when the customer’s pit bulls would start tearing each other up. It wasn’t that people didn’t enjoy the action—it was more that profits were lost because the sight of blood and torn flesh all over the floor tended to hamper business.

Life was genuinely crazy in those days. We would fall asleep in the early morning hours to the sounds of rifle fire, which signaled more violence and death on the street. It was all around us, but the



Troubles seemed in a way to be very distant—something that would never really affect our lives. All the political and social conflict seemed more like an inconvenience to us than anything, hindering us from a carefree transfer from one party to the next. Looking back, I realize how grossly naïve we were, not realizing that the very social fabric of our city was being torn apart, and all we were worried about was who was throwing the next beer bust. We were all too content to pretend that the Troubles were someone else's concern, allowing us to escape any personal responsibility. It freed us to selfishly worry about our own lives.

My live-in lady friend and I actually tried to escape the situation at one point, selling our possessions and sailing off to Liverpool, England, to start a new life. I had yet to learn that the only real “new life” is found in Jesus Christ.

A one-room, furnished apartment became home in Liverpool, and we immediately found work in the well-known Temple Bar on Dale Street. A normal week came with drinking and dancing every night and a striptease show on Sunday. Nothing much had changed in our lives, except our address. In 1972, we brought a baby girl into the world, but even that sobering reality brought no alteration of our lifestyle. We could not find whatever was missing in our lives in Liverpool, so we soon headed back to Belfast.

Returning to Clifton Park, I found work on a small coasting ship. The political environment in Belfast continued to deteriorate, as did my relationship with my daughter's mother. We both had good intentions but lacked anything spiritually that would hold a relationship together. I worked hard and drank hard. Imagine that.

The ship I worked on went into dry dock at South Shields, England, and one day, I found myself in a fight with the ship's foreman. He threw a punch at me, at which point I rewarded the effort by smashing him with a large monkey wrench. In court the next day, the judge declared, “We have heard the evidence, and I find you guilty of assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm. Does the defendant have anything to say on his behalf?”

Looking positively contrite, I replied, “Well, sir, it was like this: the bo'sun hit me when we both had been drinking a lot. I hit him back with a monkey wrench that I had in my hand. It was more reflex

than anything premeditated, sir, and I am very sorry the guy ended up in the hospital.”

The judge leaned forward a little, peering over the top of his tiny reading glasses, and said to me as his face turned bright red with righteous indignation, “Yes, Mr. McClinton, that’s all very well and good. However, you hit him *seventeen* times! You hit him *sev-en-teen* times with the wrench. *Seventeen times*! You’re lucky you’re not standing here facing manslaughter charges. Six months in prison! Bailiff, take him away!”

Off I went to Durham Prison, where, for the next half year of my life, I would sew canvas mailbags in the workshop of the infamous English jail. I ate the slop they labelled as “food,” occasionally punching anyone who tried to annoy the new “Paddy”—an Irish citizen enjoying a lengthy stay as a non-paying guest of Her Majesty, the Queen of England.

Upon release, I sailed back to Belfast to find that my daughter and her mother had set sail as well—to get away from me. It would be twelve years before I set eyes on them again.

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I arrived at my apartment with a large white stuffed rabbit for a daughter who would never see it. I was promptly informed that Mr. Rabbit and I were not only missing a family but were homeless as well. My common-law wife had given up the apartment before disappearing with our child.

I had lost a year of life with my daughter, my wife, and now I had lost my home. My pride kept me from going to my mom’s house. She wasn’t even aware that I had been in prison. I was now a homeless man carrying around my sole possession, a stuffed rabbit, which probably made me look weird, as well as a looking like a loser.

The next few weeks were spent drinking and bumming nights on the couches of old friends. Little white rabbit ended up with somebody else’s kid since I had none of my own now. I began to hit the bottle with a vengeance, drinking away any money that I was given or that came from the welfare authorities located at the same building my mother use to go to. In the same manner as they had treated her, the bureaucrat I faced would speak loud enough for all to hear. “So Mr. McClinton, you’ve just gotten out of prison, yes? When

was that exactly? How long were you in prison? Do you have *any* money?" The effect was the same on me as it had been on my mom.

This became one of the most depressing periods of my life. I spent a great deal of time around the Waterworks Park, just off Antrim Road, drinking cheap wine hidden in my coat pocket. I watched the ducks swim and responded only in grunts to anyone who wasted their time trying to talk to me. Life was one big party—a pity party.

I became even harder emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, feeling like life was dealing me yet another hard knock. I lost the rest of what little remaining faith I had in the human race trying to defy what I thought was the “unfairness” of it all. The rain began to come down on my face. Tomorrow would bring another day.

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On my next visit to the welfare office, I ran into a lady friend whom I had gone out with several times many years prior. We greeted and chatted about old times, making sure to casually ascertain the other’s current marital status—both divorced and alone. We made plans to go out a few days later.

She had two young daughters and lived in a Protestant section of Oldpark in North Belfast. We hit it off right away and went out a few times, and a short time later, I was moving into her house. Things began to look up.

Only a changed heart changes a life. Better circumstances might feel good temporarily, but it is only a delay to the return of the inevitable. I settled in living with my lady friend, tried to be a father to her daughters, and helped fix up the house we lived in. Things had improved on the outside, but I was no different on the inside.

I continued to work in the local bars. One in particular, the Everton Bar on Crumlin Road, had been bombed several times by the IRA, which made the Protestant clientele extremely bitter. This bar was where I first came in contact with the local Protestant community defenders, who would later band together in 1972 to form the Ulster Defense Association (UDA).

It shocked both the British government and the IRA to see this large Protestant “people’s army” form and march by the thousands into Belfast wearing army uniforms and facemasks. The Protestant

population had finally had enough of the IRA policy of social violence. The UDA was formed to make sure that Northern Ireland, whose citizens saw themselves as thoroughly British, would receive the protection that successively weak-willed English administrations were unable, unwilling, or reluctant to provide.

Social and political frustration caused the citizenry to mobilize and create a people's army. In a normal society, such a concept would never be legitimized. The solution to the frustration would end up only exacerbating the problem, but that was only to be discovered in hindsight.

My personal frustration with Britain's lack of response to the IRA finally came to a head. I volunteered and joined the Oldpark Battalion of the Ulster Defense Association. It seemed as natural as breathing to me, and evidently, multiple thousands of other Ulster Protestants felt the same way.

## Freedom Fighter or Terrorist?

I don't lay any blame on the deprivation I experienced as a child or any of the horrors of my alcohol-ridden, dysfunctional family. Nor do I cast any blame on the state institutions or any persons who may have mistreated me. I place the blame squarely on one reason summed up by the immortal words of the late Frank Sinatra, "I did it *my way*."

I made my own choices. I chose my own path. I was violent. I drank. Me. No one made me. I caused the suffering that others and myself still endure to this day. I take full responsibility for what I became and what I did. I chose to become a terrorist murderer.

To understand how I became involved, we have to go back a few years to 1969. I was on shore leave and found myself in a bar in Dublin surrounded by a few shipmates and some dock workers. We were all downing pints of Murphy's beer and singing rebel songs, such as "Croppy Boy" and "Johnston's Motor Car." Suddenly, someone called for a hush, and all eyes turned toward the television for some breaking news.

On the screen appeared a very somber Ulster Prime Minister, Terrence O'Neill, who spoke of how Ulster was at the "crossroads" of civil war without a standing army, air force, or any weaponry to speak of. Although mostly drunk, every man in the bar was paying close attention, and so I was met with dirty looks when I interrupted by calling for another round of beers. It wasn't until later that I would come to realize the full importance of the moment and what it would mean to the people of Northern Ireland and me. Although I would have been completely content to ignore the entire matter, it becomes

impossible once a certain level of conflict and threat rises up against your own country.

It took a while, but eventually, I could no longer overlook what was going on. I cannot name a single event or moment that compelled me into the fray; it was an accumulation of little incidents and developments over a few years time. It wasn't even the actual IRA atrocities and violence that pushed me over the edge. It was more the profound feeling of frustration and betrayal by the British government, manifested in their unwillingness to take on the IRA and protect its own loyal Ulster citizens. If England wouldn't fight for us or with us, we would fight for ourselves.

Several newsworthy events occurred during these years that served to fuel the frustration:

In 1969, while I was sailing the world:

- October 12: The Protestants of Shankill Road took on the British army, sometimes in hand-to-hand combat. Britain had abolished the Ulster Special Constabulary, 30 commonly known as the B-Specials, and disarmed the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) police force. Three people lost their lives, including one RUC officer, and sixty-four others were injured.

In 1971, when I tried to escape the Troubles by moving to England with my girlfriend:

- Three young British soldiers were abducted and brutally murdered. They were believed to be victims of provisional IRA terrorist killers.
- Sir Henry Tuzo, the British army general officer in command, declared that the IRA terrorism could not be solved by using military means.
- Harold Wilson, prime minister of England, introduced a twelve-point plan for creating a thirty-two-county United Ireland, ignoring the majority wishes of the six counties in Northern Ireland (Ulster).

In 1972, the year my common-law wife and I brought a baby daughter into the world:

- The IRA bombed the Abercorn restaurant in downtown Belfast with no warning, killing two and terribly injuring another 130 civilians.

In 1973, while I spent half the year in prison for assaulting the bo'sun with a monkey wrench:

- Anchored off Waterford in the Irish Republic, a large shipment of IRA arms and munitions were intercepted on the ship *Claudia*.
- At the Sunningdale Conference on Northern Ireland Affairs, attended by British and Irish Republican authorities, a "Council of Ireland" was established that would have power over the internal affairs of Ulster.

In 1974, when I first began my involvement in the Troubles by joining the Ulster Defense Association:

- The proposed Council of Ireland was rejected by the Ulster Unionist Council, whose leader, Brian Faulkner, resigned but later engaged in talks with the prime minister of the Irish Republic. Merlyn Rees was appointed Northern Ireland Secretary of State by the new labour British government.
- The loyalist Ulster Workers Council (UWC), supported by the Ulster Defense Association (UDA), a loyalist paramilitary group, threatened and brought to fruition a province-wide strike of workers in Northern Ireland. Lasting from May 14 until May 29, the strike caused the downfall of the power-sharing executive, resulting in direct rule from London. This occurred only after a Protestant terror group, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), planted car bombs in the center of Dublin and Monaghan, ruthlessly killing about thirty innocent Irish citizens.
- Nineteen innocent English were killed on November 21 in bars that were the target of no-warning IRA bombs in Birmingham, England. Another 182 were injured.

The IRA denied responsibility for the Birmingham bombings, but for many law-abiding, previously politically disinterested Protestants in Ulster, including me, this was the final straw. I could no longer

remain uninvolved. I would do my part to stop the IRA from bombing us into submission.

I had already tried the legal approach by joining the Ulster Defense Regiment (UDR) in Antrim. During my short stint as a UDR soldier, I received weapons training with machine guns and a revolver. I was very adept at handling these weapons and quickly became a serious student. I could strip them down and reassemble them blindfolded and learned to shoot in various positions, from standing up to lying down.

With the carrying of weapons, the UDR soldier also carried the yellow “rules of engagement” card—rules that I did not care for. These rules basically rendered me useless, as I could only fire my weapon *after* a terrorist had fired at me first. A handy rule only if the other guy is a bad shot. Not only was this rule dangerous, it went completely against my personal philosophy of strike first and strike hard. It wasn’t long before I became disillusioned with the UDR and realized it was not going to be a proactive solution to the IRA bombing.

My growing disillusionment with the UDR was not the primary reason for my eventual ejection from the organization. There was a much more familiar and predictable reason. Following a hardcore night of drinking, I found myself in an altercation with one of the more experienced sergeants in the regiment about something that only drunks choose to fight over. I reverted to my natural tendencies and broke a large glass bottle over his skull, sending him to the local emergency room. Not long after, I was notified by my superiors at the UDR that my services were no longer required, and once again, I found myself on the outside looking in, headed nowhere fast.

I tried to do the good and proper thing and joined the British army, but soon discovered that “good and proper” was not going to defeat the ruthless IRA terrorists. As far as I could tell, what the IRA needed was a dose of their own medicine, and I was rapidly becoming the person willing to dish it out. With that mindset, I enlisted with the loyalist Ulster Defense Association (UDA) and, within three weeks, was promoted to first lieutenant in North Belfast’s Oldpark Brigade. In a short time, I moved on to the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) based in West Belfast.



The philosophy of the UFF was simple and deadly: terrorize the terrorists using the most deadly and ruthless means available. An eye for an eye. The dye was set for what would become my life. My utter frustration toward Britain for failing to defend Ulster turned into rage. We would take matters in our own hands, ushering in death, darkness, and shame—the likes of which I hope to God we never see again.

### **Heart of Darkness**

How deep inside the human breast long fallen;  
So far from Grace of God and full depraved;  
Can human mind of man dare e'er to fathom  
The miry miles of passions, foul, enslaved?  
What earnest eye might these black caves examine?  
And catalogue the halls of horrors rare?  
Entombed in gloom each grisly cavered famine  
Slow starved of righteousness, soiled, bald, and bare!  
What thought still grounded sound in social reason?  
Could human voice e'er rationally employ?  
To form the words "Depraved!" for deeds inhuman  
Encountered in the heart tuned to destroy?  
The heart, the heart, cursed part of every creature;  
Filled up so full, gorged greedily with guile;  
Controls the hands and fashions every feature  
Of fiends, hell-bent, to murder with a smile.  
Look not, thus e'er too long inside man's bosom,  
For, every deed vile, dastardly, lurks there.  
And every human soul endowed with reason  
For his black heart, so dark, must say a fervent prayer.

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton, 1991

## Days of Terror

My Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) unit was assigned a base above a structure at the junction of Berlin Street and Matchett Street, deep in the heart of the Shankill Protestant community. The premises had sat unused for quite some time and were quickly made suitable by knocking down a few walls and putting in a bar. It would become one of the most notorious shebeens (an unlicensed bar) in West Belfast.

Most bars closed at 10:00 p.m., but ours was serving around the clock behind locked doors as long as you had hard cash to pay with. The long backroom had tables and chairs where punters could drink themselves into a stupor or participate in a game of poker. Every time a gambling pot was scored, there was a UFF representative on hand to collect a percentage for the bar. Not that there was much overhead; the electricity was illegally wired off the main power line, and most of the alcohol came from hijacked trucks.

In the latter half of the seventies, the Matchett Street bar was doing a thriving business in a lot more than just serving drinks. The UFF was conducting its deadly business using the location as its base, and I was soon right in the middle of the lethal activity. I practically volunteered to be at the forefront of the illegal activity, and the more dangerous the task, the more excited I was about participating. I played a type of Russian roulette with my life and personal safety. After years of heartache and self-abuse that followed my loss of Carla, I clearly realized that I was living out a death wish. I placed no value on my life or anyone else's, for that matter.

All the personal events that had brought me to this point, along with the political environment of Ulster, had opened the door wide for “Kenny, the emotionally scarred, self-destructive man” to be transformed into “McClinton, the inhuman terrorist.” Incapable of a normal life, I gave up even pursuing it and gave myself totally over to death and destruction. The light of life was growing dimmer as I ran headlong into darkness. Having been promoted to a senior leadership position in the UFF, I was not satisfied with destroying my own life. I now possessed the authority to take others with me.

Hell has been described in many ways by writers and poets. For me, it looked like the dark, dirty streets of Belfast that were frequently stained black with human blood and lost hope. The IRA terror would be answered and matched by Ulster loyalist terror—rained down on any communities, organizations, or people who harbored or assisted the Irish Republican effort.

To my utter shame, I confess that, within a couple of years, I personally took a gun and shot two men dead. With my own two hands, I buried the body of another UFF victim and trained many soldiers in the use of lethal weapons that resulted in the death of others.

As a bomb maker, I educated soldiers in the use and design of explosives. In 1977, I worked with an experienced bomb squad, taking responsibility for creating a number of large book bombs that were mailed to IRA leaders and Republican leaders. I was determined to kill as many as possible that were connected to or involved with the provisional IRA that had declared open warfare on Protestant Ulster.

Given my way, I would have returned two or threefold every death, heartache, or misery that the IRA inflicted on Northern Ireland. It never dawned on me, or I didn’t care, that the families of my enemies were being persecuted by us the same way our families were being persecuted by them. I actually thought I was being patriotic, honorable, and loyal by bombing and killing the innocent families of my enemies. The depth of deception to which the human heart can descend is truly disturbing.

I was not part of a solution; I was merely part of a violent political terrorist situation that was spiraling out of control. It would be two more years before I would begin to see the waste of precious life that

I was participating in. It's truly God's providential hand that I am even alive today to recall it.

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In early August 1977, I was working long days in a special UFF bomb squad, targeting many of the known IRA leaders. The Ulster Freedom Fighters had received a consignment of commercial explosives that had most likely been stolen from a British army munitions facility somewhere in England. I was called in and informed of the availability of these materials for our use against the IRA. However, we faced the problem of getting the explosives from one side of Belfast to the other without arousing the suspicions of local security that a terrorist strike was in the works. I personally took responsibility of transporting the explosives.

I chose a partner, and we were driven to East Belfast, taking with us shopping bags full of everyday items. We packed the explosives in newspaper, put them in the bottom of the shopping bags, and covered them with innocent-looking groceries. In the world of terrorism, things are rarely as they appear.

We had originally decided on two separate routes, giving us a better chance of at least half our lethal treasure going undetected in the event we were stopped by the ever-present British army and the RUC police. After parting ways with my accomplice, I casually boarded a city bus and paid my fare to downtown Belfast. I travelled to my destination without incident—me, my shopping bags, the innocent passengers, and enough explosives to blow up the bus and most of the surrounding buildings. I had no thought or care about their safety or mine.

It had taken me thirty years of personal suffering to reach the point of being devoid of feeling or concern about life. I don't state that to make excuses or lessen my responsibility but to help the reader realize that terrorism and violence doesn't happen in a spiritual, emotional, or political vacuum. My only motivation in explaining my mental state is to help reveal possible factors that foster terrorism. Perhaps in some small way, I hope that my experience will help others avoid the choices I made.

Reaching my downtown destination, I changed buses at city hall and continued my journey toward the Shankill area of West Belfast.

Suddenly, the double-decker bus came to an abrupt stop, and two uniformed men mounted the bus—one of them making his way directly to the rear of the bus, where I was seated with my deadly bags. Looking me directly in the eye, the officer asked, “Are those yours?” pointing to my two shopping bags.

“Yes, they are,” I replied, my calm face masking my pounding heart. He then proceeded to search all around my feet and the seats next to me, apparently satisfied with just a glance that there was nothing but groceries in my bags. I couldn’t help but sarcastically muse about how safe Belfast was with such thorough and sharp security personnel ridding us of all suspicious items that could be bombs.

Undeterred, I continued my journey without further security interruption, despite the heavy presence of RUC police and the British army. After delivering the explosives, I immediately went for a stiff drink before returning to the UFF headquarters on Matchett Street. My partner had made the trip safely without detection, and all in all, it was a good day’s work for two common terrorists.

The next day found four of us gluing the pages together of a dozen large, hard-backed books, then hollowing out the middle, leaving the covers and edges to form a sort of box. With the covers closed and the explosives added, it had the weight, feel, and look of any other innocent book. Eight-ounce bars of deadly explosives were cut, taped, and positioned in the hollowed-out space, along with an electric detonator. After installing a microswitch and some batteries, the books were closed, wrapped in manila paper, and bound with strong tape. Each book-bomb was addressed to an IRA leader, with the return address being that of another IRA leader. If we couldn’t get one, we had a second chance at another.

Keep in mind that this was not mindless, random terror. These were willful, intelligent acts meant to return the favor of terror to those we felt had dealt it first to us. If the IRA wanted to scare Ulster into submission, we believed we were justified in terrorizing them in order to make them stop. Death breeds death; terror begets terror—the only people who profit are the undertakers. Another officer and I mailed the book-bombs from multiple random post offices and then eagerly tuned into the news for the results.

In the meantime, we had received news that loyalist prisoners were being brutalized and beaten by the guards at Belfast Prison, and we planned widespread protests on their behalf. I worked with my UFF unit to put together one real bomb and some other hoax bombs. The real bomb would be detonated near the prison to encourage and motivate the loyalist inmates, while the hoax bombs would be planted in the surrounding area to disrupt traffic, close roads, and cause maximum chaos for the authorities. The message would be clear: think twice before mistreating the Ulster prisoners.

The genuine bomb was simple, even crude, but very reliable. It was comprised of a metal gas cylinder that was used to pump beer from kegs attached to explosives and an electric detonator. The bomb would be timed to explode using an old wristwatch and some batteries.

The fake bombs were made of cardboard cores from paper towel rolls stuffed with plumbers putty (which looks like plastic explosives) and wrapped in some fireworks for added measure. The intent and effect was to make these hoax explosives look authentic so that a great deal of effort and resources would be used to diffuse them. The authorities would take equal care with each and every one, suspicious that our intent was to trick them into being careless with a real one. Our goal was disruption and chaos, not death.

Two men went out to hijack a car to deliver the real bomb. I waited for them to return, but things don't always go as planned in the world of terrorism. Even though the two men were experienced hijackers and well trusted, as they pulled the stolen car up to our location to load the bomb, all hell broke loose!

Armored police vehicles came screaming from every direction, along with British army personnel carriers. Large military vehicles, known locally as "pigs," thundered onto the street as soldiers with machine guns and rifles made their way toward us.

The two carjackers were quickly surrounded by armed soldiers who looked all too ready to shoot someone. I quickly retreated into the doorway of the bar, still carrying the bomb, and was then pulled in by the other members of my squad who immediately locked the door. The only way out was upstairs through a window in the bathroom, down onto the roofs, and then along the main streets.

I had a problem, though. In my arms was a primed and ready bomb which, if set off, would destroy our entire building, along with many of the structures and people that were adjacent to us. "Wait!" I shouted to the other men who were already dashing for the escape route. "I need time to diffuse this thing! Barricade the door!"

The others quickly jammed the door with some wooden posts as I nervously began disassembling the bomb. I removed the detonator and batteries, followed by the explosives that were taped to the metal cylinder. Sweat ran down my forehead and into my eyes as three of us anxiously defused our own bomb in the midst of what sounded like a full-fledged street riot. Finishing the task, we made our way upstairs with the explosives as the police tried to break down the barricaded door. I emptied a cardboard whiskey box and quickly packed up the explosives from both the bomb and what was leftover of our deadly stash. Tucking a .45 caliber revolver into my waistband, I climbed out the bathroom window, hustled across the roof, and continued down into Rocky's backyard.

Rocky was a well-known loyalist veteran who lived near our location with his family. He looked a little surprised to see me walking through his kitchen. "I need to come through your house, friend," I said as I walked past him. He nodded with understanding approval. "You just go right ahead, son. Back in my younger days, I had to do the same more than once." Exiting Rocky's house onto Berlin Street, I saw the street packed with fighting as loyalists from various terrorist groups made their way into the fray after hearing about the police arresting two hijackers. They were joined by local Protestants and were now engaged in hand-to-hand fighting with the RUC police and the British army.

The entire intersections of Berlin, Silvio, and Matchett streets were embroiled with kicking, screaming, and fighting soldiers, police, and civilians. Many men were being arrested and roughly tossed into one side of police cars, only to escape from the other and get back into the action. Even the working-class Protestant women were scrapping with the police. There were pieces of police and army uniforms everywhere. It was chaos!

Carrying my box full of explosives, I slipped past the angry crowds, frightened-looking policemen, Protestant women and children, and bloody-faced, rioting loyalists. I was strangely calm as I

negotiated the madness and was almost to safety when a young British soldier armed with a rifle stepped into my path, intent on stopping me. Our eyes locked as we both instinctively understood the circumstances we now found ourselves in. Time seemed to freeze as we both assessed our options, oblivious to everything else around us.

Here was this fresh-faced kid in an army uniform, all of nineteen or twenty years old, I guessed, who had joined the military in search of a career or a way to get off the poor streets of lower-class England. He was tall and good-looking, full of life, and still wearing the look of innocence that life would later steal from him. His eyes, now fixed on mine, betrayed the indecision in his mind, wavering in the face of the danger he sensed yet responding to his duty as a soldier. Sweat dripped down his forehead from under his black beret.

The eyes that this young soldier found himself looking into were cold, committed, and unwavering, offering him an equal chance of life or death. The sun glinted off my revolver, which was in plain sight, my free hand resting on the nickel-plated handle. Not a word was spoken. I tilted my head slightly, asking the silent but unmistakable question, "What's it going to be, son?" On this particular day, life would win over death, as the young soldier nodded once, unlocked his eyes from mine, and turned to walk away. I resumed my journey down Belfast Street into a maze of back alleys, toting my box of destruction, wondering how long life could continue in this way.

Later that night, I found out why the police had caught on to us. Our two carjackers had picked out a car in their usual efficient manner, locating a reliable model with a trunk suitable for the job. The owner of the car found himself with a pistol to his head as he was relieved of his driver's license and warned not to report the car as stolen for at least two hours. After ejecting the owner, the vehicle was driven calmly to the door of the club, where we waited to load the bomb. We had repeated this scenario many times in the past with no problem.

This time, however, would be different, given the fact that the car was owned by an off-duty RUC police officer who alerted every security force in Belfast about two seconds after it was stolen. Knowing that a terrorist plot was underway, the car was easily traced and followed right up the front door of our location.

Just another sunny day in troubled Ulster.



## The Arrest

On August 29, 1977, my life as a UFF loyalist terrorist came to a public end.

In the midst of the book-bomb operation, and following the arrests and riot on Matchett Street, I took to even harder drinking, routinely imbibing Russian vodka, followed by beer chasers. The drinking offset the stresses of the terrorist activities. I had been on an excessive binge for more than two weeks, and it was time to pay the piper.

I awoke one day in my girlfriend's bed, sweating booze and shaking uncontrollably from a two-week hangover of drinking and stress. Although I would have never admitted it, I was inwardly disgusted at what I had become, feeling somewhat less than human. I was a murderer, an alcoholic, and sinner of the worst sort.

I had placed myself in the position of God by determining life and death over others, and my conscience had begun to torture me. My Protestant upbringing had not allowed my God-given sense of right and wrong to be completely destroyed—almost, but not completely. After all I had suffered, after all I had endured, after all the bad choices and self-destruction I had engaged in, there was still a tiny yet real spark of humanity somewhere deep in my soul that refused to be extinguished. This was only possible because of a loving God who never gives up on us.

While lying there, hungover and deeply depressed, I actually found myself praying—yes, praying—the first sincere prayer of my entire life. “God, I know you are disgusted with me. I am sick and

disgusted at myself. Can you give me a new start, Lord? Can there be a new beginning for me? Amen.”

Two days later, God answered my crude but sincere prayer. An early morning knock on the door awakened me, and instinctively, I peered out the window to see who it might be. I found myself instantly wide-awake as I surveyed the scene: My house was entirely surrounded by RUC police, the British army, and some members of the elite special services. They were all armed to the teeth and had enough fire power trained on my house to mow it to the ground.

I sighed deeply in resignation. I looked at my terrified girlfriend, hugged her, and whispered, “I’m sorry,” to her two little girls. I put on a pair of jeans and proceeded to open the front door. A large Scotsman in plain clothes stepped inside. “Kenneth McClinton?”

“Yes, that’s me. Can I help you?” He pushed past me, followed by three more RUC officers and some British soldiers. “We have a warrant to search these premises,” he said, placing his hands on my shoulders. “And you are under arrest, McClinton, by the authority of section ten of the Emergency Powers Antiterrorism Act. You are cautioned that anything you say might be written down and used as evidence against you. Do you understand?”

I looked into his eyes and found the same empty, unfeeling, ruthless look that had been in mine. He simply worked for the other side. I went through the expected motions of “Why are you arresting me?” but none of us really gave the conversation any credibility. We all knew the truth.

“McClinton, do me a favor,” the Scotsman said. “I want you to run down the street as fast as you can.”

“Why?” I asked, feigning ignorance.

“Nothing is ever going to stop you and your terrorist activities—nothing but a bullet in your head.” He slowly pulled out a pistol from his holster. “I’m here to put one there, so go ahead and do the world a favor and start running.”

There was no doubting his sincerity, so amidst my complete submissiveness, my girlfriend’s tears, and her daughters’ pleas, I was taken into custody without further conversation or incident. I wasn’t capable of understanding it at that point, but God was answering my

simple prayer—not in the way that I would have chosen, but in hindsight, I now see his perfect plan.

God couldn't show me his mercy and grace until he had exposed my murderous sins and allowed the law to administer social justice as well. I simply wanted to be rescued from my situation, but God knew exactly what was needed to truly extract me from my previous life and save me in the way that only he can. It would be a couple of years before I would realize that God was in control of these events.

I had been a full-time sailor, a full-time soldier, and then a full-time terrorist. It would seem that the next step for the man born to lose was to be a full-time prisoner. I had never been “half” anything up to that point, and being prisoner would be no different. So with a wry, rebellious smile, I was handcuffed and placed in an unmarked police car between two of the biggest cops I had ever seen.

Like other days that marked turning points in my life, the gray clouds loosed their contents, and it began to rain.

Castlereagh Interrogation Centre, Belfast

**Law Flaw**

Some make the law, some break the law,  
Some civil law maintain.  
Some others teach or learn the law—  
To practice it for gain.  
They act out roles with wigs 'n' robes  
Of scarlet, grey, and black;  
And pious as a petty clerk,  
Assist to twist the rack.  
Upon unwary working classes  
Heavy laws are laid,  
By bourgeois barristers in black—  
Who sift each sentence said.  
Then badger, bluster, bluff, and blame—  
Until the truth's obscured  
Behind some semblance of the same,  
And falsehood's safe secured.  
Corruption saps societies  
And shames them 'fore they fall—  
When legislators break the laws  
The Truth outlaws them all!

C. K. McClinton

# Prisoner

*“When those that make the law break the law in order to maintain the law, then there is no law.”*

Inscription on a gable wall in Republican West Belfast

Arriving at the Castlereagh RUC Interrogation Center in East Belfast, I was led handcuffed by uniformed policemen into a small cell, where my cuffs and shoes were removed. I was given a pair of lace-free slippers (to prevent prisoners from hanging themselves) and left alone to ponder the ramifications of the slamming metal door and examine the interior of my new home.

The heat seemed to be operating full blast, despite it being late August, making the tiny space uncomfortably hot and noticeably more claustrophobic than it already was. There was a small window high up on one of the four dreary walls that overlooked a single plastic chair and a metal-framed bed. The mattress was completely encased in thick red rubber, and there were two sheets, one pillow, and a coarse, scratchy blanket. I made the bed, settled in, and began to mentally prepare myself for whatever the day would bring.

Within minutes, the excessive heat parched my throat, and only then did it dawn on me that the warmth was no coincidence. The oppressive heat and the thick rubber mattress dehydrated the sleeper and kept him in a constant state of discomfort, meant to wear him down mentally before the constant interrogations began. This was a

deliberate but subtle technique. After a few hours of the steam-room treatment, especially following an early morning raid of his home and family, a prisoner would feel quite defeated and drained of vital energy—the perfect state of mind for being interrogated as far as the state was concerned.

Although the unlawful abuse and treatment of prisoners at the Castlereagh Interrogation Center has been well documented, that is hardly reason to sympathize with a terrorist's complaints of mistreatment. It is almost laughable that many of the terrorists from both sides bemoaned poor treatment at the hands of their captors. Maybe we should have thought of that *before* blowing things up and killing people. What a joke that we would be indignant about the state of our incarceration in light of the ruthless and indiscriminate destruction we inflicted without mercy.

The interviews began in a tiny room. I was sitting across the table from two plain-clothes officers whom I can only describe as clowns, one of whom I must honestly admit resembled the modern-day cartoon character Homer Simpson! Homer the interrogator made himself so many enemies from various organizations over the years (including, it is reported, his own police colleagues) that even today, he lives as a white-haired, nervous exile continually in fear of his life. God's law is no respecter of persons. If you treat others poorly, including those who "deserve" it, you will reap what you sow.

The initial questions from Homer and his buddy were met with derisive smirks and mocking. The exchange went something like this:

Homer: "McClinton, where were you on the day of...?"

Answer: "I don't know. Where were you?"

Homer: "Okay, what were you doing at five p.m. on the day of...?"

Answer: "Don't have a clue. What were you doing?"

Homer: "You murdering scumbag, don't you smirk at me!"

Reply: "Act like a clown, and I'll treat you like one. Next question..."

That was all Homer could take. He came around the table, grabbed me by the shirt, and slammed me up against the wall, screaming, "You're a murderer! You killed those men! I ought to take you out back and shoot you like the dog you are!"

Homer's eyes bulged, his face turned white, and he was shaking uncontrollably. His eyes were an inch from mine. I almost pushed him too far when I smiled and calmly said, "Your breath stinks. Did you know that? You really ought to do something about that."

Homer roared something unintelligible and proceeded to attempt to choke me with his soft, manicured hands. I never stopped smiling at him and continued to goad him. My goal was to get him to punch me, which would foul up the whole arrest and give me leverage against the authorities. It was not to be. Just about the time Homer was going to give me my wish, his timid partner stepped in and pulled him off me. The interview abruptly ended, and I was returned to my steam room for the time being.

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The cell door opened for another round of interrogation, and this time, my invitation came from two very different types. Both detectives were tall, but one was much heavier than the other, and they both carried themselves with confidence to the point of smugness. I found myself quite uncomfortable facing my new adversaries. I wouldn't know until later the reason for their cockiness—someone had already given them all the information they needed to prosecute me. Someone on the inside of our organization had cut a deal to save his own hide and provided detailed knowledge of all my activities as a terrorist. The interrogators didn't have to get a thing from me, so there was no pressure on them. Anything extra I provided them was just icing on the cake.

These two detectives used no brutality or threats; they merely sat across the table and informed me, in detail, of all my murderous acts: times, dates, locations, my units, the weapons, and the explosive materials.

Only someone who had actually witnessed all these things could have given such accurate and explicit information. I wasn't the first or the last to be sorely betrayed by a brother in arms. The work of my personal Judas was complete, and after five days of interrogation at Castlereagh, I signed confessions concerning my personal involvement in two assassinations, possession of weapons, and a whole list of lesser offenses.

I was promptly charged and sent to Belfast Prison on Crumlin Road to await a high court trial, which would be two years coming. I stepped into another chapter of my life on the ground floor of D-wing at the prison, trying not to think about the stench from the portable urinal in the corner of my cell. Instead I wondered about what prison life would dish out to a man so obviously born to lose.

I wouldn't have to wait long to find out.



## 1977–1978: Prison Life

For the first few days, all new prisoners were held at the bottom of the old eighteenth century, four-story building called “the base.” The base was used not only as a reception area for incoming guests of the state but also as a type of psychological assessment section where the prison would try to determine the character of new prisoners and discourage any spirited behavior through the use of some obvious shock techniques.

The intent was to get them at their weakest, when the fear of incarceration was fresh and the intimidation factor was at its highest level. It typically worked, but in my case, I was already all too familiar with the technique, so it had little effect. It would be like an army drill sergeant going through basic training again. He would already be aware that the drill sergeants were just doing their job and all the chaos was planned for a specific purpose.

On my first morning at the base, I was lying on my old iron bunk, contemplating a spider web, when the observation panel of my cell door was raised. Two eyes peered from beneath a prison officer’s hat, and then the panel was slammed shut, the cell lock unbolted, and the door was noisily drawn open with a metallic thud. In bounded two guards, shouting, “On your feet! *Now!* Get on your feet!”

I never moved, passively glancing at the guards, attempting to appear bored and unimpressed by their entrance. I calmly replied, “Well, it’s about time. Room service...you guys keep the noise down so you don’t wake anyone.”

At least of one of the guards appeared not to be amused, as demonstrated by the shade of red his face was turning. The other guard appeared confounded at my reaction, and both seemed clueless as to what to do next. I took the initiative and continued my offensive by demanding in my most belligerent tone of voice, "All right, you two. Come with me!"

I jumped off the bed and barged past them into open area outside my cell with the two screws practically chasing me at this point. They were in complete disarray and attempted to regain control and authority over the situation. "Hold on! Where are you going?" one shouted at me.

I faced about and looked him straight in the eye. "I don't know. Where?" I asked as impatiently as I could sound.

The other guard was so rattled by my behavior that he was speechless. He stood there gawking at me and appeared to be confused almost to the point where I do believe he actually had a tear in his eye. The other screw was a lot bigger and had set about to reclaim the upper hand by a tangible change of tactics. "Okay, Mac. We are going down the hall to the reception room, all right?" he asked with a compromising tone.

I rewarded his compromise with a smile and replied, "Great. Let's go."

I turned toward our destination and, now as an equal, asked, "Not a bad morning out today, huh?" They agreed, and we continued on. Up until now, the prison had been the big screw's unchallenged domain, but he merely worked a job, and I had to live here twenty-four hours a day. So I would be making a few of the rules we would interact by. I couldn't put it into exact words at this point, but much later I would pen the idea that would form the basis of our interaction: "Mutual respect is the only key to a civilized working relationship within a maximum-security prison."

In the reception room, there were some medical and discipline officers, as well as a couple of pencil pushers. The latter pair was recording the personal details of new inmates, including their physical, mental, and dental health. They also made record of tattoos, scars, weight, height, and fingerprints.

"Get your clothes off, McClinton," was the initial contemptuous demand from one of the screws.

I shot an equally contemptuous look back and replied, "No, thanks, sweetheart. You're not my type." This evoked a subtle but perceptible headshake from my escort that was a silent communication to my current antagonist: "Don't mess with this guy; he is trouble."

All the screws in the room looked to the senior officer (SO) for an indication of how to proceed. He had no doubt handled dozens of guys like me. The SO turned to me and quietly asked, "Son, are you going to give me any trouble today?"

"Only as much trouble as you force me to give," I answered. "If you and your boys respect me as a man, I will give you respect back. Treat me like an animal, and I will act like one. You can bet on that. It's your choice, mister."

The tension hung heavy in the room. Nerves tingled, hearts beat a little faster, and sweat beaded up on foreheads in anticipation of the possible fight that was a moment away. I was ready to rumble and felt the violence well up in me. The SO's eyes met mine for an instant, opened a little wider, then broke contact. "Well, that sounds reasonable enough for me. Let's just get along and get this done without any trouble. What do you say?" he half mumbled. "Go into that cubicle, get your clothes off, and you can use the towel in there to cover up. Let's just get this done."

The experience of the senior officer showed when a bit of compromise won out over testosterone. His discernment had not failed him. One sentence of mutual respect had saved him and his men from having to fight it out with me. I went into the cubicle, stripped down, and came back out for a quick examination by the medical officer. There were no more attempts at humiliation or degradation as they proceeded to catalog the distinguishing marks on my scarred body. There weren't enough lines on his form to document the memorials to my many knife fights, brawls, and injuries.

I was escorted back to my cell, and with the slamming of the big steel door, the fight in me retreated back down deep in my soul. I stared at the dirty ceiling as some inmate down the row hollered out, "Is everybody happ-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e?" drawing out "happy" in

a taunting way that did not expect a serious reply. I lay there, taking in the strange odors of urine, sweat, fear, and, from the next cell, the lyrics of a country song coming from an old radio: "And I swear once again that I'm never comin' home; I'm chasing my dreams down River Road..."

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A night of restless sleep found me waking to the sound of someone singing a gravel-voiced rendition of an old prison song:

"Six 'o clock in the morning, you'll hear the jail bell;  
Up comes the warder, and he opens your cell.  
Pack up your blankets, and empty your poe—  
And its right about turn to the stone yard you go.

Tra-la-laaa, tra-la-lee; sure, it's six miles  
from Bangor to Donagahadee."

It was hard for me to tell what time it was, because even on the brightest days, my cell was dim. I could hear what I would soon learn were the stirrings of the prison coming to life, signaling the start of another day, just like the one before it, just like the one tomorrow. I heard my cell rattle, the big bolt was drawn back, and the door swung open wide.

"Right, slop out!" barked one of the screws as he passed down the row of cells. This was the order to pick up your plastic urinal, your "pot" or "poe," and take the foul-smelling contents to the "slop house." There you would empty the contents into a Belfast sink, somewhat like a latrine, and wash out your pot. If you were lucky, there would be some scouring powder available that would help remove some of the smell. Then you would make your way back to your cell, passing lines of other inmates on their way to do the same thing or others on the way to the laundry or some just simply loitering and having a smoke.

I noticed that only every other cell door was open, and I found out from another inmate that it was the loyalists' (prisoners from Northern Ireland—Ulster) day out and the Republicans (prisoners from Southern Ireland) would remain locked in. I had already figured it out, though, having noticed the tattoos of the inmates who were out of their cells. There were arms, backs, and chests tattooed with King

Billy (Protestant King William III), loyalist paramilitary and Freedom Fighter symbols, and slogans. I had also already been greeted and welcomed by many loyalist handshakes and backslaps. It didn't take long for a new prisoner to discern who belonged to which group.

The Northern Ireland office prison administration had a "full integration" policy, which meant that terrorists from both sides were imprisoned together, necessitating practical steps internally to keep a full-scale bloodbath from occurring inside the prison. Only prisoners from one side of the conflict would be allowed out of their cells, so one day you were locked up, and the next day you were allowed out. This was the arrangement for both warring factions, all of who were on remand.

On any given day out, the inmates would eat in the big dining hall at the base of the C-wing landing, while those who were locked in on that day ate their meals in their cells. All prisoners ate off big stainless steel trays that had separate little compartments into which went soup, vegetables, meat, or dessert. The official drinking mug was plastic, as were the forks, knives, and spoons.

The food was uninteresting and bland, cooked beyond recognizable taste, and unappetizing, no matter how hungry you were. Prison tea seemed to be just a bit tastier but much less useful than paint thinner. However, we realized that this was prison and not the Ritz-Carlton, so we ate whatever was put in front of us, battling the large Belfast cockroaches, which seemed to be the only other living creatures interested in the privilege of eating our food. Remand prisoners were allowed up to three half-hour visits per week and could receive small parcels of food or fruit from visitors. Some of the pickier or squeamish inmates attempted to live off these parcels, but the majority of prisoners would simply eat anything that wouldn't eat them back.

The law stated that remand prisoners were "innocent until proven guilty" in a court of law, but the reality was that as soon as your feet hit the ground in Belfast Prison, you were treated like a convict who was "guilty until proven more guilty" by a Diplock judge and a nonjury court.

Many of the inmates at the Crumlin Road Prison claimed innocence, charging that they had been set up or framed. I chuckled as I came to realize that I was the only person in the prison who was

actually guilty of anything. Eventually I came to despise the “innocents” and treated everything else they said to me as worthless. If they weren’t man enough to own up to what they did and stood for, then why was anything else about them worth accepting? Few of them were ever found to be innocent in court, but of course, during the 1970s in Ireland, that didn’t exactly mean a whole lot either. At that time in Northern Ireland, the idea of justice was more of a relative term that suited wider political interests rather than the truth. In fact, it would seem typical of human history that “justice” is at the mercy of politics and power more than right and wrong.

Following breakfast in the C-wing dining hall, we were locked in our cells again for a head count. The screws would make their way down the rows, quickly opening the observation panels to physically verify the human inventory. Once completed, the prisoners who had that day out of their cells were unlocked and permitted to go downstairs to the prison exercise yard.

Even in prison—especially in prison—it’s good to breathe fresh air into your lungs and blow away the stink from your nose and clothing. I would soon learn that “fresh air” was not the only kind of air out in the prison yard. “Hot air” was available in abundance as well. I became a student of my surroundings—watching, listening, learning.

## Walkin' the Walk; Talkin' the Talk

On the weekends, the exercise yard was turned into a parade ground by both the loyalists and the Republicans. Upon the command of "fall in" from the paramilitary commanders, the inmates would form ranks in military fashion, dress off, and come to attention.

As the makeshift company came to order, the commanding officer would give a short address, usually wrapping up with a sentiment over a fallen comrade: "At the rising of the sun, we will remember them," to which the assembled troops would echo, "We will remember them." The sergeant would dismiss the assembly, and the men would do an about face and fall out to casually walk around the exercise yard again.

The purpose of the weekly parade was meant to demonstrate to prison authorities that we were political prisoners with our own command and reporting structure and thus qualified for prisoner-of-war status (as opposed to common criminals). On the surface, this seemed inconsequential, but it infuriated prison officials who were under strict British instructions to treat all paramilitary inmates as if they were typical prisoners, not war combatants. The same British government had passed a law the year before to remove any special political status from those involved in the conflict, and so they labeled all participants "criminals" rather than political terrorists. The label was not effective in changing behavior, however. We felt like we were in a war, and we acted like we were in a war.

After a month inside the prison, the Ulster Freedom Fighters on the outside ordered me to take over as commanding officer of C-wing. I was directed to step-up protests within the prison against the denial

of prisoner-of-war status for political prisoners. The loyalist prisoners felt utterly betrayed by the British government, who, in our opinion, should have directly fought the IRA to begin with but chose to leave the fighting to ordinary patriot-citizens. Instead of protecting us upon imprisonment, the very country that we loved and supported, Britain, decided to label us as common criminals.

Many of us had traded our souls for murder and mayhem in order to counter the IRA threat to our homes and family. Yet we now found ourselves being treated like common thieves and thugs by the very weak-willed country we were loyal to. We also became despised by the general public, especially the upper and middle classes whose affluent neighborhoods had generally escaped the IRA bombings and killings. The loyalists in the prison were frustrated, bitter, and intensely angry. It was my job to channel that negative energy in the most effective manner if our cause was to be served. Protests within the prison were the chosen method. A campaign of extreme protest was immediately undertaken. The “good working order and discipline” of the old nineteenth-century prison would soon be under strain.

In close confinement, chaos can quickly spread and grow out of control. It is much easier to destroy stability than it is to build it up. This is true, whether in a prison or in a society. Loyalists had demonstrated the truth of that fact in 1974 when an Ulster-wide strike by workers brought the entire region to a halt in protest of Britain’s introduction of power sharing via the Sunningdale Agreement. The bottom-line motivation in the conflict is that Ulster would *not* be part of a united Ireland and give up its freedom. Whether on the streets or in prison, this was, and continues to be, the primary objective that will not be compromised.

We were committed to our deeply held beliefs and would act on them to the very best of our physical and mental abilities. Over the years, I was involved with men and women who manifested a remarkable commitment to these beliefs. The prisoners in Belfast Prison were no less committed, regardless of which side of the cause they were on. There were certainly those who were blown about by the wind, changing sides and opinions to suit their immediate need, but for the most part, the participants seemed genuinely committed to their particular cause.



I was always puzzled at those who had the level of commitment to commit acts that landed them in prison but, once there for a while, decided they were no longer as dedicated to their beliefs. For example, we were out in the exercise yard one day, and a UDA prisoner named Fat Jonesy approached me to talk. We walked over to the side of the yard, under the little tin rain shelter, and I asked him what was on his mind. He told me that his trial date had just been set and that he expected to go down for a number of years. He wanted to address the loyalist inmates before being sent miles away to the H-blocks of the new Maze Prison in Lisburn.

I asked Fat Jonesy what he wanted to say. He told me that “true loyalists” would never consent to wear the “monkey suit” prison uniform and submit to treatment as a common criminal. He said he would be going on the loyalist blanket protest soon and wanted to encourage everyone else to join him. I remember thinking, *Wow, what commitment.*

This was exactly the type of devotion I was advocating myself, so I called all the men together to hear what Jonesy had to say. His address came across well, and all the men in attendance were very stirred up emotionally.

A few days later, Fat Jonesy and his accomplice were sentenced to ten years in Maze Prison, and I recall thinking how dedicated and loyal they were as they were taken away to join the ranks of the blanket protest. At that time, the protest was being carried out by a growing number of IRA prisoners and a small but committed group of loyalists. About two weeks later, the news filtered back to us that Fat Jonesy’s accomplice had immediately donned the prison uniform and conformed to H-block prison rules. Even worse, though, we found out that Fat Jonesy volunteered to be a much-hated “blanket orderly,” cooperating with Maze Prison officers in the day-to-day management of the blanket protesters. Prisoners who chose this easy route were held in about equal contempt as the Jewish tax collector during the Roman occupation or the American who helped the British during the Revolution of the States. It wasn’t just a lapse in his commitment to the cause—it was a total betrayal of everything he, and we, stood for. His patriotism was measured by his actions, which had rendered his words to us meaningless. Like Esau in the Bible, Fat Jonesy had sold his birthright for a bowl of soup in the form of prison leniency and privileges.

While his original commitment may have been sincere, the harsh reality of prison, especially the draconian routine of the H-blocks, had tested his conviction, and it was found wanting. The true character of a man was quickly discovered under these conditions, often to the detriment of those whose convictions didn't falter.

The Ulster conflicts, and no doubt others like it, identified and revealed selfishness, self-interest, and weakness in those who proclaimed commitment. There is nothing like the confining, monotonous routine of prison to sift out the truly committed from the halfhearted.

## 1978: The Hooded-Coat Rebellion

The protests continued under my command into the winter months of 1978, spurring a negative reaction from the prison authorities. The primary goal was to achieve a recognized status of political prisoner rather than common criminal. Every protest was countered by the prison with a comparatively repressive measure. It was within this context that C-wing conducted the “hooded-coat rebellion.”

The British government had ordered the prison officials to break down everything that resembled paramilitary command structure and activity with Ulster maximum-security facilities. The weekly parades were a particular thorn in the flesh, and because of them, new prison procedures were implemented to stamp out all “military practice.” A number of observation posts overlooking the exercise yard allowed the guards to monitor and identify any prisoner who was involved in the leadership of the groups.

One Saturday, after a loyalist parade in the yard, my drill sergeant, Wee Victor (who had come in from the Young Newton’s East Belfast Brigade of the UDA), was immediately confronted and charged with “instigation of an illegal assembly,” punishable by prison rules with a stretch in solitary confinement. Victor had been observed calling out orders to a company of paramilitary inmates, and the prison was going to make an example of him with the intention of stopping our weekend parades. I began to contemplate how to counter this new repression tactic.

After seeking the opinion of my fellow UFF officers, I immediately ordered another parade in the exercise yard, only this time with a

little twist. The formation would be called to order with a “fall in” from a drill sergeant who was intermingled into the formation instead of standing out front. The second parade of the day went off without a hitch and in complete defiance of watching guards. The company address was given by an inmate who was wearing a heavy parka, complete with a fur-trimmed hood that hid his entire face from the watchful screws. There was no way that the specific individual could be identified and punished.

Our additional parade and address caught the prison totally off guard and was a major embarrassment to them, effectively reversing the intended result of Wee Victor’s punishment. Even our sworn IRA enemies were impressed and were overheard ridiculing the hapless guards. The very next day, the IRA borrowed our idea and conducted the same “hooded-coat” parade. The inmates had achieved a victory, but there was no doubt it would be short-lived, as a reaction and new procedures would be quickly instituted before the next weekend parade.

We wouldn’t have to wait until the following weekend. Monday morning brought an immediate response from the penal system. A handwritten notice was pinned on the board of the dining room and read something like this:

Starting tomorrow, all remand inmates’  
clothing with hoods (i.e., outer coats) shall be  
confiscated by prison staff and returned to inmates’ visitors.

They were not only removing our ability to hide our faces but were including a dose of punishment by forcing us to be outside in the yard without adequate winter clothing. The next morning, when the guards came to confiscate our coats, every man under my command was standing naked, except for a towel around the waist. We had packed up not just our coats but also *all* of our clothes for them to take. The game of prison chess continued.

As the cell doors were unlocked and opened, each inmate threw his bag of packed clothes out onto the landing, successfully confusing the screws and causing a great deal of commotion. Prisoners began banging their plastic mugs and urinals on the cell bars and screaming in unison, “Take our coats! Take all our clothes! Take our coats! Take

all our clothes!" Within minutes, the guards locked all the cell doors and left the area.

The inevitable visit from the head screw wasn't long in coming. My observation panel flew open, and he shouted, "Can I see you a moment, Mac?" He entered to find my two cellmates and me dressed in nothing but prison towels. "What's going on?" he asked. "Why are you guys throwing all your clothes out when we open the doors?" He was nervous. You could hear it in his voice.

I answered by repeating the slogan of the day, "Take our coats, and take all our clothes. If you want to take our heavy coats, then you can just take every piece of clothing we have as well. If you do not return our coats, we will immediately start a full blanket protest. Simple as that."

"Right," he replied, searching for his next words. "I'll pass that on to the governor." The cell door slammed shut, and before long, we heard a shout from the end of C-wing. "Here comes the heavy squad, men!"

The stomp of boots grew louder as the riot squad entered the area, a development that did not bode well for the paramilitary prisoners. My cell door opened, and I was rudely escorted out into the landing by prison guards in full riot gear. I was marched over to B-wing, the punishment cells. As the punishment cell door clanged shut, I could hear from all over the prison the sound of banging doors, inmates screaming abuse at guards, and everything that could make noise was being put to good use. Before long, there were seven loyalist leaders in solitary confinement with me. The prison was responding in typical fashion—harsh and oppressive "divide and conquer" methods were the predictable response when a tense situation occurred with inmates.

It would have been nice to proclaim victory in the hooded-coat effort, but in spite of the chaos we had caused, in the end, it was not to be. The selfish personal desires of a few of the inmates would become first priority and sabotage our efforts. The loyalist inmates had been well instructed on what to do in case the leadership was removed. They were to stand fast and refuse to cooperate or move from their naked, prison-towel-only position. No prison governor wants to see their institution disintegrate into pandemonium by having naked inmates running around all over the place. If the inmates were willing

to suffer for a short time, the coats and the right to parade would have quickly been reinstated.

The prison officials tried the usual technique of spreading misinformation (lies and rumors) amongst the inmate population to try to break our will, but we held fast and were well on our way to victory. Just when we were on the verge of winning the issue, a few inmates succumbed to total selfishness and put on their clothes in order to gain thirty-minute personal visits with family and friends. I was amazed at how some of the inmates would suffer significantly at one point, then cave over something minor on the cusp of victory. It's like a person who is willing to starve himself from meat and potatoes but gives in when a piece of candy is offered. It didn't make sense to me.

As more inmates gave in for privileges, the momentum and the initiative were soon lost. At the beginning of the two-day period, when the leaders were in solitary confinement, the prison officials were practically begging us to order our men to put their clothes back on. I knew that things had changed when the prison officer's attitude transformed from nervous pleading to confident goading, bolstered by the knowledge that our troops had broken rank and caved in.

The protest fizzled out, and our coats were taken from us. The weekly parades continued, but whoever barked out orders or gave an address was promptly rewarded with a visit to solitary confinement and loss of all privileges for twenty-eight days. Big Whitey and a couple of other inmates were identified as the ones who first broke the protest, and they received a sound pummeling in the exercise yard as a consequence for their choices.

The system had won a solid victory, and overall, that did not bode well for the political prisoners in the Belfast prison system in 1978. I had gambled on my fellow loyalists and their commitment to our cause, sorely underestimating the weakness of a few individuals who were much more loyal to themselves than they were to Ulster.

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Remanded prisoners made regular trips to the Belfast High Court via an underground tunnel running from Crumlin Road to the courthouse. The court days were Tuesday and Friday. The frequency and routine of the court appearances were due primarily to the law

that stated that a prisoner had to appear before the judge to receive each successive remand sentence. This law was meant to protect someone from being remanded to prison indefinitely without his case being seen by a judge. Fair on the surface, but the reality was a prisoner's remand sentence just kept getting renewed for as long as they wanted to keep him in prison.

So my next move in the protest game was to order all the loyalists to appear in court, wearing nothing but their underwear, thus showing utter contempt for the entire system. This infuriated the guards, the prison officials, and the judge to no end. I hated the prison system, and it hated me.

The hooded-coat protest had failed, but it was not the end of our protesting. Because I ordered and led the protests, I was singled out from that point on for special treatment by the prison authorities.

The dye was cast. Let the games begin.

**On Prison Perseverance**

Once more the scourge cracks sharply 'cross my back.  
Life's lees of disappointment fill my cup.  
My jailor's heartless hand seems seldom slack—  
As secretly he beckons me to sup.  
To drink his dregs of tearful poverty;  
To sink mid mires of sorrow, chilled and cold;  
To slump and fall and falter feebly—  
While all the time he preens with power untold.  
And yet, once more the proud old Ulster heart,  
Refuses e'er to yield to slavery.  
And tho' it seems all dreams are torn apart—  
Up from the bowels of soul boils bravery.  
Alive! Alive! I thrive mid treachery!  
Lapped up, its hatred heats my heart white hot.  
And helps me heap up hopes with spirit free;  
And sing the victor's song, DEFEATED NOT!  
So on I go, through endless prison years;  
Deferred in love, and warmth, and comfort sweet;  
The State seeks, thus, to slay my unborn babes—  
With wounds of woe, to watch my unwed widow weep.  
Yet, Godly Retribution always knocks  
Upon the tyrant's door with heavy hand.  
Blind Arrogance shall shortly reel in shock—  
As Freedom flares, untrammelled, through this land.

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton



## **The Number One Diet**

A few days after the hooded-coat protest failed, I was headed back from a half-hour visit with my mother, and I found myself the recipient of some special treatment from two rather large screws.

I was tossed into one of the search boxes, where inmates were body searched before and after each visit. One of the screws barked, "Right! Arms up, McClinton." It was at that point I sensed that I was in for a lot more than a simple body search, judging from the tension in the air. I raised both my arms, allowing the officer to conduct the typical light frisking that was mandatory to make sure a prisoner was not smuggling anything back from a visit. It quickly became obvious that the two screws had been ordered to do more than frisk me, and their resolve to carrying out those orders could be felt in the air. I knew I was about to get a beating, so I decided on a pre-emptive strike.

Using the element of surprise to my advantage, I launched an attack, landing a solid punch to the ribs of the first guard, doubling him over to meet the second punch—an uppercut straight to the chin—which sent him sprawling on the floor. The other guard had frozen in surprise just long enough for me to throw an elbow back into the side of his jaw. He screamed like a girl and ran from the search box. I turned my attention back to the first screw and unleashed a kick into his ribs, asking quietly, "What do you think, youngster? Still want to be a prison guard?" His eyes rolled back in his head more from humiliation than pain as he lay on the floor of the small room—now a prisoner of a prisoner.

I took a moment to enjoy my short-lived victory, fully realizing the hell that was about to come. Before long, four or five well-muscled prison guards piled into the small search box, unleashing a fury of punches and kicks in my general direction. It wouldn't be until later that I would actually feel any of them, licking my wounds in the privacy of my own cell. Being vastly outnumbered, I was overpowered by sheer brute strength as they dragged me from the search box to a narrow space in the punishment cells of B-wing. Upon arrival, the skinny senior officer, sporting a fine military mustache, confronted me from underneath his uniform cap, which was pulled down just above his sharp, snakelike eyes. His beet-red face announced his rage as he shouted, "How dare you attack my officers!" Then he slapped me across the face, much like a woman would slap, and grabbed me around the throat with his soft, never-seen-a-hard-day's-work hands.

The two officers who held me tight, one on each arm, provided me the foundation to kick both of my feet up in the air and land a solid blow square in the chest of Mr. Skinny Soft Hands. He shot backward several feet as I laughed manically, unsettling the guards, and I immediately unleashed a backward head butt to the guard holding my arms. I yelled out, "No surrender!" as eight prison officers now joined the rumble, each eager to hit me harder than the last. Within the small confines of the room, the fight looked much like a rugby scrum.

At one point, I found myself down on one knee under a pile of screws, looking up and punching them between the legs with uppercuts. We were so packed into the small room that the guards were punching each other as they tried to punch me. For a few moments, I was enjoying the advantage from below of being able to pick my targets and land some painful blows.

The fun wouldn't last, however, as I was quickly overpowered and flung unceremoniously into one of the punishment cells. I pursued the officers toward the cell door, still trying to hit and kick them as they made their exit. The cell door was slammed shut and locked down, leaving me alone, bleeding, and broken. I was now in the one place that the prison preferred to have me: the solitary confinement cells of Belfast Prison.

Later on, I was taken to the hospital to have my jaw X-rayed for breaks, but for the time being, the prison guards were content to let me suffer for a while. I would end up being charged under prison

rules for "gross personal violence against prison officers" and sent to trial before the prison governor. I was escorted to the governor's office, surrounded by prison guards and following the usual meaningless formalities. I was sentenced to twenty-eight days of solitary confinement, losing all privileges, and placed on what was called "the number one diet."

Only the most persistent and egregious offenders in the prison received this sentence. In my usual spirit of sarcastic rebellion against authority, I mockingly thanked the governor for honoring me with such a prized sentence. I was dismissed in a hurry from his office and was roughly half dragged back to begin my punishment.

At that point, I didn't have a clue what the number one diet was, but I would soon find out. It consisted of a mug of the vile, lukewarm prison tea and a single slice of bread for breakfast. For lunch, I would be treated to a plate of watery prison soup and another slice of bread. Dinner was again a mug of tea and a slice of bread. The prisoner was fed this diet for three consecutive days followed by one day of normal diet. This cycle was repeated over and over during the sentence.

The practical purpose of such a diet was to weaken the strong-willed prisoner physically, stress him out emotionally, and give him a reason to decide that cooperation is preferable to rebellion. An inmate returning to the main prison population after enduring this diet would be noticeably thinner, typically subdued, and predictably easier to control. The technique worked; we knew it, and the prison knew it. Somebody forgot to tell me, however.

My cell was next door to two friends of mine who had been part of the UVF terrorists known as the "Shankill Butchers." They were currently enjoying a permanent vacation in the B-wing solitary unit. As I sat in my cell, evaluating my wounds—typical cuts and bruises from a brawl—there came a knock on the wall from the cell next to me. I scooted over to wall to reply, "Yeah? Who is it?"

"It's me, Basher," came the voice from the other side, muted by the thick nineteenth-century walls. "Are you hurt bad?"

Everyone in the prison knew who Basher was and that he and those like him were in solitary confinement because of the extreme nature of their offenses. The prison justified the confinement under the guise of "personal safety," but in reality, all the inmates knew that

the activities of Basher's group were no worse than our own. We were all violent killers; we just chose to inflict it in different ways.

Once I realized who was in the cell next to me, we lay down near the water heater pipe that ran across both cells and communicated through it. "I'm okay," I informed him. "Nothing broken, except maybe my jaw. It's swelling up." He told me to get up by my cell window and he would swing me something.

"Swinging" was how inmates passed items from cell to cell in solitary. The stitching in our wool blanket was unraveled and braided into a thin rope to which a weight was tied, such as a tube of toothpaste. We would attach messages or other contraband to the end near the weight, and sticking our arms out the window, items could be swung and caught by the inmate in the next cell.

I stuck my arm out and, after a couple of attempts, grabbed the string and hauled in what turned out to be half of a chocolate bar, a gift of solidarity from a fellow prisoner. Touched by such a gesture, I got down by the heating pipe and thanked Basher, to which he replied, "No problem, mate. And don't worry. I don't smoke." It was amazing how such trivial information made the rounds in prison. I hated cigarette smoke, and even though I had never personally told Basher, he already knew.

From that point on, I became close friends with Basher—a friendship that continued during our entire imprisonment and even after our release. It ended the day he was shot dead.

The next day, after I was treated to the "number one diet," Basher and Billy (who was in the cell next to him) devised a plan that would not only help feed me but would strike a blow to the prison's regime and boost prisoner morale. As remand prisoners (prisoners charged with terrorist acts under the Special Powers Act), we were allowed to wear our civilian clothing, have three half-hour visits per week, and receive parcels from our families. Since I was being punished, I had lost all those privileges. Basher and Billy, even though they had to live in solitary, still had all their privileges. Their plan was to feed me from their food parcels and foil the attempt by the prison to starve me into submission.

Our biggest obstacle was the logistics of enacting the plan, because the skinny officer that I had dropkicked across the search

room had been assigned to be "personally" in charge of my every need during my stay in the solitary resort. There was no doubt that he would be itching for a little payback.

The initial plan was that Billy and Basher would receive their food parcels, make sandwiches for me using the bread from their daily meals, and then swing them over to me from the windows. Our first attempt at that came to a rude halt when we discovered a guard had been placed outside our cell windows for the sole purpose of keeping us from swinging anything. So it was back to the drawing board.

Finally, we came up with a plan. Around six o'clock each evening, I was visited by my black-eyed, mustached, skinny personal attendant. He always brought a buddy with him for good measure. Smart move. I would be permitted to retrieve my mattress, pillow, and blanket, which were routinely removed every morning so that I was sure to be uncomfortable all day long—an added touch of customer service available only in solitary confinement. Each cell was also equipped with a poe (a combined urinal and toilet) to keep the prisoners from having to be let out constantly to use the wing restrooms.

So for the last activity each evening at six o'clock, I would carry my poe to the wing toilet, where I would empty it and wash it out. In the wing toilet were three cubicles, a slop sink (where poes were emptied), and a steel trash bin. Our plan was for Billy or Basher to ask to use the toilet around 5:30 p.m. every night, wrap some food up in tinfoil, and hide it in the trash bin in the restroom. I would retrieve the items, hide them down my pants, and return my cell. Simple enough.

However, I miscalculated the level of hatred Ol' Skinny had for me and how much he was determined to hinder my every step. He followed me into the toilet and watched my every move, giving me no privacy whatsoever. If our plan was to work, it was going to take something more ingenious. So one day, when we found ourselves alone in the men's toilet, I turned to him slowly, gave him a seductive look—complete with a little half wink—and said, "Hey. How's that eye? You know, that was *very* manly how you took me on the other day." As I leaned in a little toward him with my best look of admiration, he became noticeably uncomfortable standing alone in a

men's toilet with a prisoner who was now giving him the eye. He didn't know if I was serious or just trying to mess with him, but the "man" in him took over as he barked, "Quit screwin' around, McClinton. Get your business done and hurry up!" He turned and exited the bathroom to wait for me outside the door, which was exactly what I was hoping for.

I retrieved the foiled-wrapped food from the trash bin and hid it down the front of my pants. Neither Skinny nor the other screws noticed anything as they tossed my mattress and me back into my cell for the night. It was chow time for me that night, and after the final headcount, I lay on my old straw mattress and dined on fine cheddar cheese sandwiches, ham, and some chicken.

When my twenty-eight days in solitary confinement on the starvation diet ended, I had gained approximately fourteen pounds in body weight! The prisoner officials were both perplexed and outraged. Mission accomplished. The C-wing inmates gave me a hero's welcome back, cheering and banging on their cell doors with mugs and urinals. I was told a few years later that even the IRA prisoners banged on their doors in a show of mutual respect for a fellow prisoner. We all suffered at the hands of a common tormentor.

Two days later, I received a visit from one of the head officials. "McClinton, you're a thorn in the side of this prison. You know what we do with thorns? We pluck them out and get rid of them. Pack your bags. You're going to Maze tomorrow," he said as he tossed two old clothing bags at me.

I looked at my two cellmates for a moment and started packing. Another chapter of my prison life was over, and a new one was about to begin.

### **Repression Progression**

Swallow down emotions rising,  
Raw within yon scrawny throat.  
Halt with hate hot tear-ducts prising  
Molten hurts from mental moat.  
Hide with pride damned disappointments;  
Bitter, like sharp flinty flights  
Battering in fate's foul appointments,  
With wounds of woeful, wifeless nights.  
Place that plastic mask upon you,  
Inscrutable, to all you meet.  
Face the foe with fearless features—  
Fashioned for your foes to cheat.  
Deny bland bureaucrats their pleasure,  
As they carve their pound of flesh.  
Pray they soon receive, in measure,  
Twice your hurt, in kind, no less!  
Thus, the years and fears relentless  
Fall like lash-blows 'pon one's back.  
The prisoner lives alone, contentless,  
Stressed and stretched 'pon prison rack;  
Until that point of time, so poignant,  
When mask and man become the one—  
The Hyde-like horror once laid dormant  
Awakes to act with mercy none!

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton, 1990

## H-Blocks: Maze Prison

Herded like animals, about ten prisoners and myself were loaded into “the horsebox” to make the trip to Maze Prison and the renowned H-blocks. The horsebox was like a cattle car with high metal sides sectioned off into ten barred compartments and was routinely used to transport remand prisoners to hearings and trials.

The stainless steel cells were extremely claustrophobic, and if you were unfortunate enough to get a rear compartment, you could count on being tossed around with every bump in the road, as well as getting thoroughly choked with exhaust fumes. After being handcuffed and packed in, we were driven under heavy police and army escort from the Crumlin Road Prison to the Maze Prison in Lisburn, some five miles outside of Belfast.

Maze Prison was located on what had been an old airfield during the Second Great War. It was converted to the Long Kesh internment camp to house approximately 340 suspected IRA members who were arrested and held without trial in 1971, a result of the Operation Demetrius by the British army. Not long after, loyalists who supported the British were imprisoned as well, stoking the political fires in Ulster. The prisoners were held under special status as members of paramilitary organizations and were housed in compounds because of the lack of prison cells. By the end of 1974, there were 1,116 political prisoners, including 51 women, who were part of compounds ran much like prisoner-of-war camps. In 1975, the Secretary of State ordered the cessation of paramilitary special status. From that point on, all political prisoners were considered nothing more than common criminals.



It was under these circumstances that I now found myself packed in a cattle car headed for the H-blocks of Maze Prison, so named because of the shape of their construction. As the horsebox came to a halt, a number of prison guards could be heard shouting outside the transport, and the stomp of heavy boots were mounting the vehicle entrance. I realized quickly that we were in for some classic military boot camp type of intimidation from the guards who were outfitted in military uniforms, combat boots, and very stern-looking prison caps. At thirty years of age and already having experienced more life and death than most of the other prisoners or the guards, I was not going to be easily intimidated.

Each cell opened in the horsebox, preceded by a guard barking, "Right!" while producing his most menacing and aggressive posture meant to gain a psychological advantage over the young, meek prisoners. "Get out of here! Now! Move!" The word *right* was used like the word *attention* to prepare a man for further orders or instruction. This kind of mental conditioning was surprisingly effectively on men who normally wouldn't think of being submissive, even to physical coercion.

The keys were noisily inserted into my cell, and the door almost flung open off its hinges. "Right," the rather large guard shouted at me. I shifted around a little and looked up at him with my best sleepy look. "Hey, Mac. Keep it down, will ya? You tryin' to wake me up or what?" I stretched and yawned like I had just rolled over from a good night's sleep in a luxury hotel. My new friend, the prison guard, stood there speechless. It was priceless; where's a camera when you need one?

Well, I was on a roll, and I wasn't about to stop now. I barked at him, "Right! Let's go! Come with me!" and promptly marched down the aisle of the horsebox, out the door, and down the ramp with the hapless guard still trying to figure out what to do. Exiting the cattle car, I began to sing with utter joy, "Here we are again, happy as can be...all good friends and jolly good company..." complete with a little two-step dance to accentuate the performance. There wasn't a guard in sight that appeared to have a clue what to do next.

I took advantage of their hesitation and marched straight into the reception area, totally unquestioned by any staff member or officer. The reception area was full of administrative employees and guards

going through the usual in-processing/interrogation routine meant to further subdue new inmates. Needless to say, I was unphased by this process as well. Regardless of my immunity to the scare tactics, it did not change the fact that I was entering a prison where survival of the fittest was rule number one.

Having had my fun for the moment, I fell into place and continued the process. When the group of new arrivals I belonged to were finished being “tagged and bagged” (personal information recorded and belongings taken away), we were stuffed into “bean tins,” SUV-type vehicles that could hold about six inmates within the same type of enclosures as a horsebox. We were transported somewhere deeper into the prison, but we had no idea which part, because the bean tins were windowless—on purpose. The prison was appropriately named “Maze,” given all the turns and stops we encountered along the way.

After bouncing over a few speed bumps and stops at several security gates, the bean tin came to a halt, and the rear door quickly came open to give us our first view of H-block.

The designation “H-block” came from the shape of each building that housed prisoners. They were shaped like the letter H, with a central area and four wings. Each of the wings—A-D—and the common area were secured with heavy steel caging, dividing the block in five sections. Each wing had an exercise yard segregated from the adjacent wing by tall, corrugated steel partitions. Each wing was, in essence, a little mini-prison within the prison.

The middle crossbar of the H shape housed the prison guards’ chow hall and restrooms, the security control room, the governor and the principal officers’ offices, as well as a med center and admin area. There were eight of these H-block buildings, each sitting in a rectangular compound and surrounded by its own set of razor wire and corrugated steel walls.

Outside the H-blocks were other prison facilities, workshops, soccer fields, a hospital, visiting areas, and a separate block dedicated for punishment. Each of these areas was sectioned off and secure with transportation of prisoners occurring via bean tins. Given the walls, fences, and bean tins, the inmates never could actually see where they were in the overall layout of the prison or the route taken to get there, making any attempt to plan an escape especially troublesome.

A successful escape from any portion of the prison would only leave the hapless freedom seeker facing another secure section to negotiate. Most inmates never even contemplated such an adventure; although in later years, some Republican prisoners succeeded in escaping because of the breakdown of the Draconian Maze Prison regime.

I entered H-block Four in 1978 on remand, waiting for my trial, and discovered that most of the incarcerated “men” had forgotten they were men. It would take significant suffering by a handful of us to return the general prison population to a state of dignity.

The British prison system at the Maze was renowned for its success in psychologically oppressing the young inmates. The frequent shout that rang in the corridors was, “Get out of your lockers!” which was a derogatory way of implying that the prisoners were such cowards that they were hiding in their foot lockers, frightened by the sound of the prison guards.

It was in this time, this setting, and this context that Belfast Prison would now encounter the man who had been aptly nicknamed “The Maniac McClinton.”

### **The Man from Cell Fifteen**

In a cell at the furthest end of the Block  
Lives a man in a world of his own.  
His body they’ve trapped and caged within,  
But his mind has just up and flown!  
His thoughts are of places and people he’s met  
And of wondrous things he has seen.  
They’ve tried many times, but they can’t bend the mind,  
Of the man from cell fifteen.  
They’ve taken away food parcels and shop,  
All privilege has gone just the same.  
The reason for this was a temper too quick,  
Tho’ at times he sure wasn’t to blame!  
He’s been many trips to the punishment Block,  
Bread ‘n’ water has made him quite lean.  
They’ve tried many times, but they can’t bend the mind  
Of the man from cell fifteen.  
They banged his cell door at dawn’s early light

After keeping him from his night's sleep.  
They thought that the din and the rumpus they made  
Would make the tired man jump and leap!  
On his bunk he lay still, with that strong stubborn will,  
And just acted like they'd never been.  
They've tried many times, but they can't bend the mind  
Of the man from cell fifteen.  
Now, to make him be meek, one visit per week  
They allowed him to have, 'stead of three.  
This cost him his wife, and the loves of his life,  
The two children who'd sat on his knee.  
But he changed, not a bit, tho' alone he would sit,  
In his eyes there still burns a bright sheen.  
They might break his heart, but they can't bend the mind  
Of the man from cell fifteen!  
Soon his heartaches will mend, (tho' his mind just won't bend!);  
At their own game he'll beat them, I'll bet!  
And I fear we might find, that by using his mind  
He'll get free from that prison cell yet.  
Then beware all the fools, who bent all the Rules,  
And abused him with curses obscene—  
'Cause they must face the wrath for crossing the path  
Of the man from cell fifteen.

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton, 1978

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I spent the majority of my time on H-block in solitary confinement. A deeply entrenched habit of dealing out “instant violence” to any antagonist did not fare well with the prison guards, who would frequently attempt to prove their dominance of me.

Each incident earned me a three-day vacation in the punishment block, kept in strict solitary separation from all the other prisoners. The more I was sent there, the less it would change anything about my behavior. The staff in the punishment area became so familiar with me that they actually started treating me with a little respect and human dignity, which was all I was wanting in the first place. Even a modest amount of respect from them was returned with the highest level of respect from me.

It was this experience that led me to coin an oft-repeated phrase in later years: “Mutual respect is the only key to a successful working relationship between prison staff and prisoners within a maximum-security prison.” Before you dismiss that as bleeding-heart nonsense, remember that we were political prisoners incarcerated for a cause—at least in our minds. We were not common miscreants who knew nothing of authority or respect.

It was during this time I learned the lost art of “out suffering your opponents.” It seemed at times that most of the prisoners were willing to engage in this fight against the prison system as long as it was some *other* prisoner doing the suffering. Every inmate wanted the “glory” of defying the Man, but few were willing to make the personal sacrifice necessary to see our goals met. The struggle was often long and lonely for those of us willing to get off the bench and into the game.

During this period, while awaiting remand trial, I encountered some particularly crass and bitter screws in the H-blocks at Maze. Among them were the affectionately nicknamed Dangerous Dessie, Sammy Robot, Horsehead Smith, Herman the German, Big Bad Bob, the Red Rat, and the infamous—within the prison world anyway—Principal Office Davy Short. There were many others, all of whom possessed an “I hate life” disposition, who seemed to believe their occupation was not that of prison guard but rather being the “official in charge of making life miserable for political prisoners.” The primary requirement for this position was nothing more than the desire and ability to get paid for humiliating political prisoners of the British state.

There is no doubt that most of these men, in reality, should have been sharing a cell with us, because it was obvious they possessed no redeeming qualities useful for society. Yet this ragtag crop of misfits was passed off as professional screws hired to carry out the incarceration policies of the English government. Their common cry of justification—“We’re just doing our jobs”—rang hollow because of the obvious enjoyment they personally relished from the power over other men they had been granted.

Sometimes it was so bad that I believe a few of them actually reached a point of being mentally deranged and sadistic. A human heart must reach some level of inhumanity to continually inflict such

abuse on fellow humans, not only without remorse, but worse—with enjoyment.

Dangerous Dessie frequently claimed to follow the prison rules to the letter but blatantly broke them all on a regular basis to further his relentless climb up the prison guard career ladder. My first encounters with Double D were no doubt humiliating to him and, in the end, played a role in the prison finally taking a look at their own personal role and responsibility concerning the dangerous problems in the H-blocks. The screws seemed oblivious that their behavior toward prisoners was a major contributor to the violence not only inside the walls but on the troubled streets of Ulster. Dessie was bound and determined to oppress us into submission with never-ending confrontation, abuse of power, domination, and breaking our wills with frequent punishment for the most minor of offenses. The stage was set for Dangerous Dessie to have an experience with Maniac McClinton.

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A loud squeak and a metal clang welcomed me one morning, followed by the rattling of keys and the opening of my cell door. “Right! Up you get, you tramp! You should have been out of that rack long ago, McClinton! Get up, and get it made. *Now!*” hollered ol’ Dangerous.

I was a light sleeper. I turned on the acting skills, feigned a deep, heavy yawn, and replied, “Hey, cloth-ears. Keep the noise down. I’m trying to sleep.” I peeked out from underneath my forearm to observe his reaction to my disregard for his authority. His reaction almost shocked me!

There he was, standing in my cell doorway. Double D was about my size and age. He was fully decked out in his military-style Maze uniform consisting of blue pants with a permanent stitched crease from waist to boots; big, black, spit-polished boots; a light-blue shirt sewn and pleated to emphasize the shoulders and chest; all topped off with a peaked hat especially cut to make the peak fall directly over the guard’s eyes to make him appear as menacing as possible.

It was his half-hidden eyes and facial expression that caught me by surprise. His eyes had opened wide in disbelief of my response, and his face had gone from pure white to blood red with rage. Dessie

was accustomed to rarely having his superiority and dominance challenged, especially by a lowly inmate. His choices over the next few moments would determine what course our interaction would take. Predictably, he proceeded to make the biggest mistake of his career.

Dangerous Dessie charged into my cell, yanked the blankets and sheets off me, and began to scream in my face. "Out of it, you stinking tramp! Get out of that bunk! *Now!*"

In one fluid, instantaneous motion, I leapt from my bunk, clothed only in boxer shorts, and proceeded to engage Dessie in what would become a moment of truth for him. If he would have chosen to stand his ground, it would have at least afforded him some mutual respect for being a "man." However, in the split second of time, he had to evaluate and choose a course of action. His true nature came out from hiding behind his prison uniform and façade of bravado, and Dangerous Dessie showed himself to be Cowardly Dessie.

With the Maniac bearing down on him, Dessie's courage melted like snow on a hot summer's day. He actually turned and ran from my cell, hollering and screaming for help like a little girl who'd just been confronted by a grizzly bear. So pathetic and sissy was his screaming that it would constantly plague him for the remainder of his career. Prisoners on the block that witnessed his display of cowardice not only would never forget it themselves—they would never let ol' Dangerous forget it either.

As soon as he left my cell, I immediately got dressed and waited for the inevitable stomp of heavy screw boots that would precede the heavy squad who would come and take me to the punishment block. Meanwhile, taunting mimics of Dessie's cry for help rang through the H-block wing. "Help! Help! It's me, Dangerous Dessie. Help!" The other inmates were extracting every ounce of humiliation from the event.

Dessie had learned the hard way, in the man's man world of prison, that when you play the tough guy, the day will come when you either have to put up or shut up. Mutual respect is the foundation of managing antagonist situations or arrangements, and every action has a consequence. It took the prison establishment a very long time to learn this valuable lesson, and in the meantime, the suffering continued.

Off I went to the punishment block for three days of an all-expenses-paid vacation, which would be spent doing push-ups on the cold cement floor that doubled as your “bed” while visiting. I would also have time to read the old King James Bible that was a mandatory occupant of every British prison cell.

Upon my return to H-block, I was informed that I had been moved from Dangerous Dessie’s B-wing over to A-wing, the opposite leg of the block. My new home was cell fifteen, located at the far bottom end of the wing—as far away from any association with prisoners at the top end of the wing. I was confined to my cell for two weeks following any three-day visit to the punishment block because of my “bad influence” on the other prisoners. My very presence was determined to be “promoting rebellion,” so I was to be isolated as a rule in the “interest of prison order and discipline...”

Over time, it seemed to become a prize to be the screw that could tame the Maniac. My isolation did nothing to hamper the attempts or frequency the guards took their shots at provoking me, which predictably would come right as I was about to complete another two weeks of solitary confinement.

The guards in my wing were under the guidance of Principal Officer Davy Short and were actually working toward breaking my spirit. Eventually it became apparent, even to them, that it wasn’t going to succeed. I had become too hardened by life to be affected by a little isolation, sleep deprivation, or threats of bodily harm. The best they could do was get me three days of solitary in the punishment block, followed by two weeks of isolation in my cell, but it would always cost them more in reputation than it ever cost me in suffering.

It is common practice in prisons for the inmates to be granted certain privileges, but neither the general public nor the inmates have a clue as to the real reason why. Things like food parcels, family visits, and personal cash to spend had only one purpose: they allowed the prison system greater control over prisoners, because these things could be taken away as punishment.

When disciplining or punishing, whether it’s an incarcerated adult or a wayward teenager at home, if the offender has nothing to lose, you have far less control and leverage than if they have much to lose. Privileges mean enjoyment and freedom. The threat of losing those privileges becomes a great source of leverage to the authority



who controls them. This social control is well known in environments of punishment and discipline.

In fact, with the loss of all privileges, the will of the offender is actually strengthened. In prison this is doubly true because the worse that can happen is continued incarceration to different degrees, and incarceration is not exactly a huge threat to those already locked up.

The problem with this tactic, though, is that if the authorities aren't careful in acting reasonably, they can create very volatile and dangerous situations. Hundreds of men who feel they have nothing to lose are a disaster waiting to happen. Prison systems that continue with long-term oppression or deprivation run great risk of causing a backlash that can destroy both the prisoner and the prison.

I was most likely going to end up a lifer, and there is no time off for good behavior for lifers. Having nothing to lose, nothing to gain, and nothing to look forward to made it almost impossible for the prison to have any effect on my conduct, no matter how hard they tried or how bad the conditions. Rebellion was my only outlet for maintaining my warped sense of human dignity, so rebellion became my calling card.

In 1978, I was sent to the punishment block fourteen times in nine months for "gross personal violence on the prison staff," followed by the typical two weeks of isolation in my cell each time. On my fourteenth trip to punishment, I made what was known as the "prison governor's request," which was a request to communicate directly with the prison governor. Entering the governor's office in the punishment block, the inmate is led in by two guards who march the inmate into the governor's presence. The inmate has no legal obligation to march in military fashion, and you can rest assured that Maniac McClinton had no intention of performing for the gov, all of which combined for a volatile situation.

The authorities at the Maze, in keeping with the British policy of criminalizing us (rather than calling us political prisoners), always demanded that we recite our prisoner identification number upon demand as part of the "governor's request" process when standing at his desk. This was a great source of contention for me and, combined with the marching expected of me, was one more conflict waiting to explode. It would be amazing if I ever even reached the governor's office.

The time for my meeting came with the creaking of the observation flap in my cell door. It was slammed down hard, the door flew open, and two screws started to enter and would attempt to force me to march down the hall. Unexpectedly, I heard a voice say, "Hold it! You men are not needed. You are dismissed."

I was puzzled, to say the least. My forehead wrinkled with curiosity as I allowed myself to relax just a little. The senior officer of the punishment block walked into my cell and smiled. "How ya doin', Mac?" My mind raced trying to figure out this new tactic, making a mental observation that the farmer better double up the locks on the chicken house when the fox starts smiling at him. I had already heard the two guards walk way, boot steps fading away with distance, when I walked the assistant governor next to the senior officer.

"I'm Governor Donnelly," he started. "I've taken an interest in you, and I'm getting conflicting reports concerning your behavior. Some of my officers say you are nuts and that you are a violent thug who cannot be controlled. Others on my staff, especially down here in the desegregation unit, tell me that you give them no trouble at all. In fact, they say you are clean and well behaved and doing your time in complete cooperation. I don't see how both those things can be true. I'm confused, so I thought I'd find out personally. Tell me, McClinton, what kind of person are you?"

I studied his face for a moment, looking for signs of deceit or manipulation, but found only what appeared to be sincerity-wrapped curiosity, so I chose to repay the respect with a respectful answer. "Apart from your officer in the punishment block, and now yourself, very few of your guards have ever shown me any respect as a man. They treat us like animals and then expect us to give them respect for their authority. I can promise you, Governor, it will never work that way. Your men down here treat me like a fellow human being, and in return, I give them the same consideration and respect right back. It's that simple."

The assistant governor was obviously evaluating me for sincerity and only nodded his head at some private decision known only to him. "Thank you for being forthright, McClinton. I appreciate your honesty, which I know when I hear it. Now what was it that you wanted to petition the Secretary of State of the Northern office with your governor's request?"

I continued respectfully. "I wish to petition the state for permission to do my remaining time here before returning to Belfast for high court trial."

The governor looked at me and then looked over at the senior officer before returning his stunned gaze back in my direction. "You want to do your whole time in punishment block?" he stammered.

I laughed and continued. "Punishment? What punishment, Gov? I get to rest. I get three meals a day. I get to clean out my cell and sleep at night without some clown's radio blaring all hours of the night. These officers treat me like a man. Where's the punishment? I'd like to stay here until I am returned to Belfast Prison for trial."

Those comments brought laughs to both the other men, freeing the room of tension as they stood there, shaking their heads at the idea. "You're a piece of work, McClinton, I'll give you that, son, but I can never give you permission for something that would cost me my job. You take care of yourself, Mac." And with that, the pair exited my cell, still chuckling over my request.

The door shut, and I was alone with my thoughts, wondering if I had earned some respect at the highest levels of the prison. I reached for the old prison-issued Bible and started to read myself to sleep. I opened to the book of Acts and found that I wasn't the first guy to be locked in a prison cell, and I certainly wouldn't be the last.

When my latest scheduled vacation ended, I left the punishment block and returned to my own cell, only to be summoned to the principal officer's office for a visit with none other than Davy Short. I knew something was up when he invited me in to sit down, a privilege given only when earned in some manner. Davy was a big brute of a man with a reputation for being hard and tough. He had fought many inmates and would take on even the biggest of opponents in their cell.

Officer Short was looking intently at me, no doubt probing me for weakness or fear. Finding none in the expression I returned, he asked, "What are we going to do with you, McClinton? My guards can't handle you. My staff orders you to do something, and you just refuse, no matter what we do to you. We're just gonna keep going round and round, aren't we?"

I matched his demeanor and replied, "If your men treat me like a man, they will get my respect and cooperation. If they continue to

treat me like an animal, I will become the wildest animal you have ever seen. Listen, I just got back from punishment block, so why don't you save me the bother of having to unpack my clothing bags and just go ahead and call some of your boys in here right now. Let them come in and mess with me, and I'll give you a reason to send me back to punishment, saving us both some time and aggravation."

Big Davy looked me square in the eyes as his cheek twitched from a nervous spasm. He quickly ascertained my icy resolve and my complete disregard for consequences and made an abrupt decision. "Okay, Mac. Tell you what. I will make sure that no one abuses you for the remainder of your time here if you will give me your word that you won't attack anyone anymore."

Sincerely, I replied, "You have my word that your staff will get no trouble from me if they will give me respect as a man and treat me humanely. I've got better things to do than harass screws all day."

And so it ended. I returned to my cell in B-wing, H-block Six, and was cheered on by inmates from both political sides. I had successfully endured the harshest punishments the Man could dish out without surrendering my commitment, dignity, or integrity. From that day until January 1979, when I returned to Belfast Prison for trial, the Maze Prison staff gave me little trouble, and in return, I gave little back.

Maybe the "Maniac" wasn't such a maniac after all.

## **An Assassin!**

January 1979: Upon my return to Belfast Prison, courtesy of the horsebox VIP transportation service, I was to be tried in the high court for two counts of murder, as well as a number of other terrorist acts. The other remand inmates orchestrated quite a hero's reception for me after word of my antics at Maze and the guards' persistent but failed attempts to break me filtered through the prison system.

The Crumlin Road staff was not about to make any attempts to tame me, knowing that the infamously cruel Maze regime had failed on all counts, even embarrassing themselves on more than one occasion. So I settled into my routine in A-wing to prepare my legal defense for the trial.

I was utterly guilty of every single offense I was charged with, but just like most of those charged in the 1970s for terrorist acts, there wasn't one shred of actual evidence against me, other than some written statements of confession. So just like everyone else, I battled the Diplock courts for my freedom.

The Diplock report, aptly named for Lord Diplock, who headed the commission that compiled the report by the same name in 1972, made recommendation that nonjury trials be utilized for terrorist offenses because of the risk it posed to jurors. It was argued that a lone judge be employed so that intimidation and retaliation could not be used against anyone who voted to convict a terrorist. This was to be enforced for as long as it was determined the "emergency" need was present in Ulster. The Diplock Commission also reported that confessions from terrorists should have wider admissibility, opening the door for all sorts of interrogation abuses. The British government

adopted the recommendations of the commission, and the system then came to be known as “Diplock Courts.”

Whether official policy or not, it was known that in the Diplock Court, a prisoner was presumed guilty until proven “more guilty” by the court. It was a faceless, heartless conveyor belt penal system that saw totally innocent young men incarcerated—many for life sentences—due to the “lock-’em-up-and-throw-away-the-key” approach. However, in my own case, I was guilty as sin, and they were punishing the right guy for the right terrorist acts, regardless of the fact that they did it without one shred of credible evidence.

Freedom is something that few principled men will let go easily, even when those principles are warped, so it took the court a full seventeen days of me lying my butt off before they found me guilty. I fervently delivered every logical argument of innocence that I could conjure up, taking every question that the chief high court prosecutor, Mr. Appleton, could throw at me and wrangling with him to the bitter end.

The judge, Justice T. O'Donnell, stopped the trial at one point and said, “Mr. McClinton, are you trained in courtroom procedure?” I replied from the witness box that I was not. He continued. “I have watched you for three days now being cross-examined by Mr. Appleton, and not once have you failed to field his question, turn and look at me, and deliver a logical argument or answer, then turn back to Mr. Appleton and wait for the next one. For someone never trained as an attorney, you are one of the most capable and intelligent men I've had in this courtroom. I have been so amazed at how you've handled yourself, I had to stop and ask you this. Mr. Appleton, you may continue.”

The trial continued another two days after those comments, and on the seventeenth day overall, Justice O'Donnell looked me square in the eye and, without so much as a flinch, declared, “McClinton, I find you guilty of the two charges of murder and guilty of all the other terrorist acts you are accused of. I find you to be a cold-blooded, callous, and ruthless human being. You are, in fact, a UFF assassin! You are hereby sentenced to two counts of life imprisonment, to serve not less than twenty years. Take him away!”

The judge could not have been more correct in his decision or his perception of me. However, I looked into his eyes, stood up, and,

flanked by two burly prison guards, pointed my finger at him and shouted, “You have sentenced an innocent man! Let that be on your conscience!”

My theatrics changed nothing—least of all the judge’s opinion. I was a terrorist assassin, just like I was pronounced, but I was not about to let the Diplock court system have one minute of satisfaction for convicting me. I was guilty. The judge knew it, and I knew it, but I was going to do my best to steal his peace of mind by causing him to wonder—if even just a little—whether or not I might be innocent.

In a new and strange way that I’d never experienced, a Bible verse that I had read from that old King James Version while in solitary confinement came clearly to mind: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). It was as plain as day, even to my ungodly mind, that this was an unalterable truth, an unheeded warning that I had now experienced firsthand. God would not be mocked. Whatever you do in life, there’s going to come a time when you’ll harvest whatever seed you’ve planted.

I was amazed at the sudden realization it was time to pay up for a life of violence and self-will. Here was something from the *Bible*, of all things, that rang crystal clear and true in my own life. I had mocked God by deciding that I could live my life in the most degenerate manner, including deciding who would live and who would die. I had planted the seeds of murder with utter callousness, denying them not only their right to life but also their family’s right to experience life with them. I no longer deserved the right to life or family either, as demanded by God’s justice—something I could neither deny nor argue. The UFF had become my god, dethroning the rightful Ruler who had already declared my fate: you reap what you sow.

I was consoled by self-pity, declaring inwardly that I really didn’t care, because no one ever bothered to care about me. “Look how I’ve been forced to live! Why should I care about someone else dying?”

So I smothered my conviction and guilt under a lifetime of personal suffering. What had happened to me at the hands of others justified what others suffered at my hands. So I lay down to sleep, safe in my rationalization.

The guilt would come calling again in the future, but for now, I was content with shielding my tortured mind from it. Anger was my friend, violence my revenge. Misery loves company. I was miserable and had lots of company.

“And no man could tame him...  
my name is Legion, for we are many.”

### **Ulster's Forgotten Army**

In dawn's first grey and grisly glare,  
Our lonely souls awake;  
To warders beating 'pon the doors—  
Their abuse we've got to take.

“Get up you tramps!”, we hear them scream,  
“Get those bed-packs made!”  
With their hats pulled down across their eyes,  
Like guardsmen on parade.

We have no answer to these quips,  
We've nothing left to say!  
You see, we're the forgotten men  
Of the loyal UDA.

Forgotten by our comrades true,  
Forgotten by our mates;  
Forgotten by the back-room boys  
Who hand out release dates.

Forgotten by the politicians—  
Violence they abhor.  
These very men Who's “Call to arms,”  
Started this bloody war!

“Take up the gun!” We heard them cry;  
“Shoot to kill!” they said.  
At night when we faced Ulster's foes  
They were safely tucked in bed!  
“No surrender!” was the call,  
“Not an inch!” they cried.



And many men took up the gun -  
And many others died!

"Kill to stay British!" they pleaded hard,  
"To Britain you must be true!"  
Yet, most of the stick I'm gettin' here,  
Is coming from some English screw!

They took the freedom from our lives;  
They took our daughters, sons, 'n' wives;  
They took from us the clothes we wore—  
No joy, no love, no life, no more.

But there's one thing they'll never take!  
Our pride stands firm, 'twill never break!  
Until that day when we, as one,  
March to freedom in the sun!

One day, perhaps, when times get rough,  
These Prods will look around;  
At their great cities, blown to bits,  
And burnt down to the ground.  
"Where's our boys?"  
You'll hear them cry,  
"Where's our fightin' sons?";  
"Where's the gamesters, full of grit,  
Where are their loyal guns?"

These questions will be answered then,  
And sad will be the shock:  
They're all down here with me, you see,  
FORGOTTEN, IN H-BLOCKS!

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton, 1978

## 1979: The Loyalist Blanket Protest

Still dressed in my best lawyer-for-a-day sport coat, the trip back to the prison from the high court gave me a little time to contemplate what a twenty-year sentence would hold for me. The prospect of two decades of imprisonment stirred up even more intense anger, and my status as a legally convicted murderer-terrorist only fueled my bitterness about life.

The hated horsebox arrived all too soon at Maze, ending my thoughts about the future. The here and now came rushing into focus as screws slammed open the doors and commenced with the usual routine.

“Right! Out of there, boy!” a stern voice barked into the horsebox. His faced peered through the door opening, and as soon as he discovered whom he was barking at, his countenance dropped, and his tone of voice lost its bravado. I can only imagine the expression on my face as I glared at him with all the anger and resentment that was coursing through my veins. It was obvious that his detour toward the other end of the box was not accidental.

I emerged and surveyed the unfolding scene. A path was formed between the usual two lines of guards guiding the prisoners from the horsebox to the door of the reception block building. One of the younger guards, predictably cocky in his newfound authority, was shouting derogatory instruction at some of the other inmates. I watched as an older guard stepped over to privately give him a little instruction of his own.

“Don’t mess with McClinton; he’s bad news” must have been the essence of his comments, because he simply shut up from that point on.

Arriving inmates were locked up in reception cubicles where they had to exchange their street clothes for the drab, gray-denim prison garb, complete with a blue-and-white striped shirt and shapeless boots that never quite seemed to fit anyone’s feet right.

All around me this changing of clothes was occurring, but not for me. I just sat there brooding, daring any guard to come over to my cubicle and make me change. The door of my cubicle opened slowly, and I could see two big guards standing outside. One stood ready with keys, prepared to lock the door quickly at the first sign of trouble.

“You gotta get into your uniform, Mac,” the officer said.

I looked him dead in the eye and tried to enlighten him. “If you and your girlfriend want me to wear that monkey suit, let’s see you make me.” The door slammed shut and was locked before I barely finished the sentence.

I was left alone to ponder what solution they would implement as processing was completed on all the other inmates. One by one, they were “tagged and bagged” and led off to different H-blocks throughout the prison.

Finally, my cubicle door opened wide, and there stood a dozen monster prison officers that formed a gang known as the “heavy squad.” They were connected to the riot squad and were called in for situations that required brute force and definitive corrective action. The principle officer in charge casually entered my cell and, in what would easily pass as a quite civil and respectful tone, asked me what my intentions were. I had no misconceptions about what he really meant: “We can do this the easy way or your way. What’s it going to be?”

“I’m a political prisoner,” I informed him. “I will not wear the uniform of a common criminal, nor will I conform to any prison rules.” He leaned slightly toward me and, with an unusual tone of respect, even understanding, quietly said, “You’re headed for the blanket protest, aren’t you?”

He actually seemed sincere, so as was my already firmly established personal rule, I returned his approach with mutual respect. I explained to him that I was determined to conduct a blanket protest until my demands to be recognized as a political prisoner by the British government were realized. The officer told me he was sorry but his duty was to prepare all prisoners to enter the blocks, and he wanted to believe that we could get this done without hostility.

"I've got no axe to grind with you, mate," I assured him, "but under no circumstances will you get me to wear that uniform, not even just to get from the reception area to my cell." Nodding with a mix of acknowledgement and consternation, the guard told me to "hold on a moment" and abruptly left, leaving me to ponder my fate.

Following about ten minutes of deliberation, the principal officer returned to my cell. "Let's go, McClinton. We're going to take you to H-block Six to join a few of your loyalist comrades who are also on 'the blanket.' Can we count on your cooperation?"

"Of course," I agreed, as I always did when treated with true respect (as I understood it at the time). I was escorted to a waiting bean-tin transport and headed out for block six. Once there, I stripped off my clothes, tossed a course prison blanket around my shoulders, and, with the clang of the slamming steel door, I officially joined the ranks of the loyalist blanket protest, the sole purpose of which was to gain recognition as a political prisoner by the British government.

About a dozen loyalist blanket protestors inhabited H-block Six, all of whom gave me a rousing welcome, banging their cell bars while declaring, "No surrender!" until we were all hoarse. The prisoners began calling to each other, trying to find about the particulars about the new, naked neighbor. A guy named Ghandi, who I recognized from the UDA, asked me who I was. Ghandi heard my name and just about went hysterical at the news.

"Hey! Listen up!" he called out down the block. "Guess who showed up for a visit? It's Kenny McClinton!" I was amazed at the cheering and hoopla. The morale soared as we cranked up a traditional sing-along far into the night.

Misery loves company, and this particular band of miserables needed all the company they could get. The loyalists rarely learned to

accept the self-suffering typically required to have societies concede new political principles or to force change in established prison policy. In other words, to get a society to accept the political statement you are trying to communicate, you must be willing to pay the price in personal suffering. Or if you want an institution like a prison to change policies you think counterproductive or failing, again you must be committed to accept personal suffering to have that change considered.

The loyalists hadn't learned how to accept the reality of this self-suffering. Of course, it's always easier to use hindsight to determine what other people *should* have done, so while I don't want to be too hard on my fellow loyalists of that time, their lack of commitment (demonstrated by their unwillingness to personally suffer) was simply not present at the crucial moment it was needed.

That night I counted the cost of what I had gained and lost in my life to that point. The "lost" column dwarfed the "win" count. I was not very encouraged about what life had been and what it looked like it was going to be.

### **Just a Bulb?**

The stout prison door, it slams shut for the night.  
The prisoner looks up at his bulb's yellowed light.  
'That's another one over,' he says with a grin;  
But the bulb doesn't answer, for it's just glass 'n' tin!

It has no care for how long he has done,  
Neither cries at his sorrow, nor laughs at his fun.  
Tho' there's not much to laugh at in this dismal place.  
For, the prisoner feels broken, his life's in disgrace!

But the bulb feels no pity, no compassion, nor doubt—  
It just does its duty till it's time to go out.

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton, 1977

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One fine day in 1978, the steel observation panel of my cell door suddenly slammed open to reveal Dangerous Dessie peering maliciously through the narrow slit. He slid a letter into my cell, and as I reached for it, Dessie mockingly intoned, "That'll make for some good reading, McClinton." He was laughing as he clanged the door shut and walked away.

I tore the letter open and quickly scanned the opening lines to discover it was the expected "Dear John" letter from my common-law wife. She was sick of coming for prison visits month after month only to be turned away because the Maniac was in solitary confinement...again. She was ready to move on with her life, stating that her two children needed a real father. She left no doubt that our relationship was finished and wished me well.

It came as little surprise to me, robbing Dangerous Dessie of the joy of what he thought would be painful news. I had already heard rumors that her ex-husband had been courting her again after I went to prison. I wrote her back and thanked her for the time we had together and for putting up with me as long as she had. I wished her the best and gave her my blessing and assurance that moving on with her life was best for her and her kids. I still felt "born to lose," but at least I could lose with a little dignity.

Even though Dessie didn't get the joy of seeing me upset about the letter, I didn't pass up the chance to bust him in the chops next time he came through the door, just because he had *hoped* I would be hurt by the letter. Just to make sure he got no satisfaction whatsoever, I had already spread my version of the story around to the other inmates. At one point, in an obvious lighthearted moment, I stood up in the dining and publicly announced, "Guess what? My girlfriend just ran off with her husband!"

Everyone laughed, and I pretended it was funny too.

It was only later on when I was paying the solitary confinement penalty for busting Dessie that I was forced to genuinely deal with my injured emotions. In prison, especially in a prison where you are "The Maniac" trying to change things, you cannot afford outward emotional expressions of sadness or disappointment. An old Simon and Garfunkel song came to mind: "I am a rock, I am an island...and a rock feels no pain...and an island never cries..."

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I had caused a lot of suffering and death. I had lost a lot personally too. My misguided but total commitment to the Ulster Freedom Fighters and battling the IRA terrorists was eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, and blood for blood.

I gave up anything resembling normal humanity when I chose to take life for the loyalist cause and particularly after I had actually done it. Every time I followed orders to take precious life, I forsook my right to my own. By shooting two fathers dead, I forfeited my right to be a father. By killing some poor woman's husband, I gave up my right to a happy marriage and love. I had ruined the homes and lives of innocent women and children and, as such, ruined my chance to ever have a family of my own.

I had denied others the freedom of a peaceful life, and now I had lost my freedom. The only thing left were the clothes on my back, and I willingly gave those up for a cause I was convinced was just and right.

How could the Protestants of Ulster watch idly as Catholic Irish nationalists and Irish Republicans hell-bent on murder took over our country? Someone had to defend our people! The British government sure wasn't going to. Frustrated Ulster politicians made a general "call to arms" while the Irish Republic claimed jurisdiction over our six counties.

In some deep, unexplained manner, it seemed fitting that I was now pacing a solitary confinement cell floor stark naked, draped only in a coarse prison blanket. I was a prisoner for life and, by all appearances, very much alone.

I knew psychologically and spiritually that I was not alone at all. In my soul was entombed a legion of hurt, hatred, and perceived betrayals boiling and building up pressure like a volcano getting ready to erupt. It would not be long before the magma of rage would pour out and spew all over the H-block prison administration.

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*Clang!* The observation panel suddenly slammed open against the cold steel door and snapped me instantly into my current reality. In walked Horsehead Smith and Sammy Robot, two of my earlier

adversaries that had unsuccessfully tried to break me during the '78 remand period.

"Right! McClinton! Cell search!" With my blanket wrapped around me, I rose and moved to the cell wall, genuinely wondering what these bozos hoped to find in a cell pretty much devoid of contents. Still, they went through all the motions of a real cell search as I watched with a smirk. They examined the empty clothes locker, peered into the vacant tin closet, flipped over the bare mattress on to the cell floor, and carefully inspected the simple table, putting on a most sincere act of trying to find "something."

This waste of time suddenly became intriguing as Horsehead took out a screwdriver and got up on the single plastic chair I was allotted. He removed a thin, round piece of metal that covered a three-inch hole that evidently was meant for running electric wires or hanging a light fixture. After carefully probing the small enclosure with his thick finger, he turned to the Robot and said, "Nothing here."

"Very well, Mr. Smith," the Robot replied in his most official-sounding, important voice. After replacing the cover, they both turned to leave and, with a slam of the heavy steel door, were gone. I stood there, wondering what the purpose of this Laurel and Hardy routine was...there was always a reason. Was it a mistake? Were they supposed to find something? Neither of them had approached me, even though they searched every inch of my cell.

I was finally enlightened about the whole thing by my cell neighbors, Ghandi and Isaac. They told me the unnecessary cell searches were simply a way of letting prisoners know who was in charge—that every part of your "life" was open season any time. It was their way of establishing who was in charge, as well as a way to harass the blanket protestors. There wasn't anything of substance to take away from us, and we didn't conform to their rules, so this was one of the few remaining ways they could demonstrate control.

Of course, I didn't pass up the chance to figure out some way to use this useless exercise to the advantage of the protestors or to fulfill my somewhat zany sense of humor. I had twenty years of looking at whitewashed walls ahead of me, so I would jump at the chance to have some fun, especially at the expense of the clownish guards. I sent out the word: "Get me something to use as a screwdriver."



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Speaking of holes in the wall, let me tell you a little side story. In 1978, the Republican prisoners had discovered a small weakness in the concrete walls. There were two little round sections of wall running between each cell that had been filled with soft plaster after the framing was removed that were used to form the wet concrete. They were about four inches in diameter and located at the floor line. Rather than being filled with concrete after the framing was removed, builders had simply filled the holes with plaster and painted over it.

I was in “isolation punishment” one day when an IRA inmate in the cell next door knocked on the wall and said, “Kenny, get down to your pipe, mate!” I put my ear next to the cell heating pipe and heard him ask if he could punch a hole through the wall from his cell to mine. Somewhat bemused, I told him to go ahead.

It turns out that he and his cellmate had been using parts of their bed frame as digging tools to excavate the soft plaster out of the wall. With a muffled thud, he punched through into my cell, but it was loud enough to alert the screws on our floor, who began a search to locate the noise. “Who’s hammerin’ on my walls?” one yelled.

Luckily, I had some adhesive tape that I had smuggled in a few days earlier. I used it to tape notes and antiauthority poems written on toilet paper to my inner thigh, which I then distributed to the other prisoners in common areas. I took some of the tape and was able to quickly replace and stick the plaster plug back over the hole just in time before the guards hit my cell. It fit perfectly and was almost completely undetectable.

The screws barged into my cell. I’m sure they were hoping to catch me doing something wrong. They would jump at the chance to charge me and get me back into the punishment block. It wasn’t going to happen this time. They looked around, apparently disappointed, and continued on to the next cell, ignoring my usual and predictable tirade.

Later on, with the excitement subsided, I opened up the hole again and had a conversation with the Republican prisoner neighbor. He thanked me for getting the hole plugged up fast enough to keep from giving away the secret tubes. I was grateful to know about the

holes, as they would turn out to be vital in the long years of isolation that were to follow.

There are many ex-inmates of the infamous H-blocks from both sides of the conflict that most likely owe their sanity to those little tubes that allowed communication between cells. The holes were used for quite a while before finally discovered and permanently blocked off with heavy steel plugs.

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My “screwdriver” showed up in the form of a prison uniform button that was shaped by grinding it against the concrete wall. It was just right for removing the two little screw nails from the metal plate that covered the hole in the ceiling Horsehead had searched. I was ready, if not full of expectation, for the next cell search.

*Squeak! Clang!* I looked up to see two beady eyes peering at me through the observation panel. After a moment, the panel was slammed shut, and I could hear keys noisily unlocking my cell door. This time it was Horsehead Smith and Herman the German.

“Cell search, McClinton! Get up!” With mock cooperation, I got up, wrapped myself with my blanket, and stood against the wall. Outwardly, I appeared unconcerned and disinterested. Inwardly, I was in full anticipation of what was about to happen.

Horsehead and the German went through the usual routine of pretending to search every part of my cell, knowing full well they would find nothing in my Spartan quarters. Predictably, Horsehead reached for my chair and got close enough to my face for me to smile directly at him and give him a little “wink-wink.” He paused for a moment, no doubt embarrassed and aggravated at me for this disrespect, but chose to continue the search rather than respond.

With a noticeably red face, he pulled the chair over and got up to remove the screws from the little round metal plate on the ceiling. He glanced over at me while removing the last screw, and I blew him a kiss just to really make him mad.

“You think you’re real cute, don’t you, McClinton? You can clown all you want, boy, but you’ll still be here tonight when we go home to our wives and family. You’re *never* going home again.” He topped it off

with a taunting laugh as he stuck his fingers in to probe the hole in the ceiling.

“Ah, what do we have here?” Horsehead looked darn near excited at the prospect of finding something in my cell. He tugged at the piece of prison blanket wool I had tucked carefully into the metal pipe that protruded into the socket fixture. He gently pulled out an arm’s length of wool thread, then another, then another, and then another—it seemed like a whole blanket had been unraveled. It finally produced a piece of prison toilet paper that was tied on the end.

“I got you now, McClinton!” Horsehead gleefully exclaimed to me and the German, who looked on with fascination. “We know all about your little hiding holes,” he said, thoroughly enjoying my Oscar-winning performance of looking like I was caught red-handed by guards that couldn’t be outsmarted.

I knew full well that every protestor on the floor would be up and listening intently via the heating pipes and tubes in the wall. Horsehead took his time unrolling the toilet paper, savoring every second of his unfolding discovery. I could almost hear him thinking out loud, *What is it? Is it an important secret communication to the Freedom Fighters? Is it a vital military plan? Is it instructions on how to disrupt the prison? What kind of recognition will I get for this? A promotion?*

He unwrapped the paper and peered closely at the small, carefully written words, absorbing each word in anticipation. Herman the German dropped his guard, trying to read the note, when he should have been watching me. I stood against the wall, enjoying the unfolding scene with my continued mock concern. Then it happened...

Slowly but surely, you could see realization dawn on their faces. Horsehead’s face changed from gleeful expectation to something that can only be described as sickly white, then red, then kind of a purple-blue. Herman the German just stood there for a moment with his mouth open in a kind of “I’m stupid” look before turning to make a prudent exit in an effort to distance himself from the embarrassment.

Horsehead finished reading the message, kicked the chair viciously into the corner, and tried to shout something at me—but succeeded only in a choked outburst of sound from deep in his throat, complete with a shower of foaming spit.

I made sure he endured a great big smile from me the entire time he realized he had to retrieve the chair and replace the metal cover. I thought he would twist those screws in half as I attempted to give him one clearer look at my now-beaming face. Horsehead thundered from the cell without another word and slammed—I mean *slammed*—the cell door shut as the entire wing erupted in shouts and noise.

The blanket protestors went nuts with laughter and started banging on the steel doors with anything they could find. Someone started the chant of “Horsehead, Horsehead,” while others tried to neigh like a horse, but they could hardly manage it because of laughing so hard.

Everyone on the floor already knew about the note being planted and what I had written on it. Everyone within laughing distance was waiting for the moment when a guard would find it while searching my cell.

Written very carefully on the toilet paper in clear print was, “Look at you, you stupid, stupid man. Did you fools think for one minute I would actually hide something important for you silly clowns to find? Yours truly, the loyalist political prisoners.”

Those words, written with a stolen pen refill from a staff office on prison-issued toilet paper, were meant to inflict maximum humiliation on the prison guards and were burned into Horsehead’s mind for a long time to come.

Protestors 1, Guards 0.

We would sleep well on that particular night, but tomorrow would bring another day.

## Reflections on the Mirror Search

The poisoned minds that ran the Maze Prison were relentless in pursuit of more underhanded means by which to persuade the loyalist blanket protestors to conform and abandon their cause. As is often the case, even people with legal authority abuse their power and are not concerned about the greater good of civilized society.

State oppression—not correction or justice—is never a means that can justify the end. Even when committed by officials, two wrongs still do not make a right. No matter what the desired result, uncivilized or evil methods are never justified. Social problems are only deepened when those who lack integrity and moral constraint are bestowed with power and control over others.

When the righteous are in authority,  
the people rejoice; but when the wicked  
beareth rule, the people mourn.

Proverbs 29:2

Not long after the public humiliation of Horsehead, I was called for a monthly statutory family visit that happened to fall on my birthday. Each conforming prisoner was allotted one mandated visit and three privileged visits per month. Since I had joined the blanket protest, I automatically lost all prison privileges, leaving me with only the one statutory visit each month. Even that one visit left me with a dilemma.

To participate in the visit and see our families, we had no choice but to don the gray prison uniform in order to leave the H-block for

transport to the Maze Prison visiting room. This was a no-win situation for the protestors and could not be avoided if we hoped to maintain any contact with our family at all. Even if we had chosen to forego the visit, it was not fair to our family members to suffer for our decision. I grudgingly put on the drab prison outfit and loaded up on the bean tin for the ride over to the visiting room.

Walking into the family area, I found my older brother, Davy, and English lady friend waiting at one of the small meeting cubicles. The shock on their faces was obvious as they stared at my full beard, uncut hair, and sloppy-fitting prison garb. Once they got past how I looked, we enjoyed a quite memorable twenty or so minutes of what might have simply been good family conversation had it not been conducted in a prison. Life seemed downright “normal” for a few minutes.

Davy informed me that he was getting top billing at the London Palladium. He was an accomplished singer, having formed several pop groups in Belfast before progressing on to a successful solo career in England and beyond. I was genuinely thrilled at this news and his wonderful accomplishments, but just like that, the visit was over. The tears flowed and with a “happy birthday,” they were gone.

I was in relatively happy spirits as I exited the visitor’s area, anticipating yet another strip search that accompanied every contact with outsiders. Something inside me sensed, however, that this search was not going to be normal, as I picked up on the nervous tension of the guards. My eyes narrowed to wary slits as I entered the small search-area enclosure.

“Get stripped, boy!” the bully guard known as Big Bad Bob barked.

I surveyed the scene around me as I began to disrobe: there was Big Bad belligerent Bob, another small-statured senior officer who looked unconcerned at his compadre’s attitude, and two other screws who stood apprehensively in each corner of the six-foot square room.

Head held high, eyes unflinching, I sized up Big Bob as I finished removing the last of my clothing. If the guards expected some sort of embarrassment from me because of my stark nakedness, they would have a long wait. I couldn’t have cared less. I stood there, fixating my gaze on them completely without concern or thought about the

clothing. Why should it bother me? Every single morning, I walked butt naked up and down the H-block wings to the showers and toilet. At one point, I had even appeared stripped, except for sandals, in front of the remand court with headlines reading “McClinton Makes Full-Frontal Attack on Courts!” To think that another strip search would cause me consternation was folly.

So there I was, completely naked, arms lifted, being looked over by the guards. The senior guard, “Woods,” unexpectedly introduced a new twist to the procedure that disgusted and enraged me. He took a mirror and placed it on the flooring, demanding I that straddle it, squat down, and spread my buttocks for an anal cavity search via the mirror.

I immediately refused, and the more physical aspects of the search culminated with the entire search area becoming a war zone in a matter of minutes. This disgusting, humiliating procedure was implemented for the blanket protestors to cause further degradation and admittedly to keep the nicotine-addicted prisoners from smuggling in smoke papers and tobacco. However, the prison guards were all well aware of my aversion to smoking, and this search technique was used on me, or attempted to be used, for the sheer humiliation of it.

I considered the mirror-cavity search as purely punitive, a blatant disregard of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Rome, 1950), which prohibited torture and inhumane or degrading treatment of prisoners. The Maze Prison has a long, disgraceful record of violating and ignoring pretty much every fundamental human right and freedom. But I digress...

As soon as I had refused the mirror search, Bad Bob grabbed one arm, another guard latched on to my other, and they began to pull me over the mirror in an attempt to force my compliance. They pulled and I pushed. They pushed and I pulled. At one point, they were able to get me over to the mirror, so I simply stood on top of it and refused to budge. I’m not sure they were going to find much stashed between my toes.

A man can only be dominated if he allows himself to be dominated.

—Engraved in a Maze Prison cement windowsill, cell two punishment block, in 1978 by Kenneth McClinton

Panting for breath, Bob finally lost it. With other guards holding my arms behind my back, Big Bad Bobby cut loose with his best roundhouse punch, landing it squarely on the side of my forehead, opening up a wound that bled freely down my face and nose and dripped on to the mirror. Before the first drop of blood hit the mirror, though, I had managed to twist my left arm free from the screws, and I grabbed Bob by his uniform shirt and yanked him toward me.

As he fell off balanced toward me, I cold-cocked him with a heavyweight contender left jab square in his arrogant, abusive nose that buckled his knees before he ever figured out what was happening. Then I pulled with all my might on the guard who had my other arm, causing him to stumble over the prostrate Bob, and sent him headfirst into the sidewall with a resounding *thud*.

With blood streaming down my face, I spun around on the mirror and went to work on the other two guards, who immediately called a truce. "Okay, Mac. That's enough. It's over!"

Woods was calling an end to the battle as not-so-Bad Bob struggled up on one knee, then collapsed onto a plastic chair, trying to catch his breath and figure out what truck had run him over. He surveyed his ripped jacket and no doubt ached from his impressively busted nose.

The other guards were nervously trying to compose themselves, standing out of obvious reach of me and looking for some sign from the senior officer on what to do next. Never missing a chance to make things worse, I decided to taunt them. "What? Done already? I was just starting to have fun..."

Senior Officer Woods had seen enough to make him regret the event. Years later, he confided in me that he was surprised Big Bad Bob had been dropped so quickly, given his well-known reputation for bullying and taunting drunken officers down at the social club. Now here he was, bloodied, sullen, and dazed before one naked prisoner. His toughness evaporated in a matter of seconds. Personally, I've met few bullies in my time who really could stand up to a real fight. Most of the time, they are just blowhards that no one has ever stood up to. Whether kids or grown men, bullies are generally cowards and all talk.



With the fun over, off I went, naked, back to the punishment block, where I threw a towel around my waist and a rough prison blanket over my shoulders, attempting to relive some of the genuinely happy moments I had with my family earlier that day. Using my prison-issued Bible as a pillow, I faked a none-too-sincere smile and sang “Happy Birthday” to myself. Just another day at the Maze...

Morning came with the inevitable march to the governor’s office, where I would receive my punishment for the butt kicking I had laid on my hosts. Although everyone there, including the governor, was well aware of the real reasons for the new search procedures, they proceeded through the farce with a straight face and an air of authority. Whether they were willing participants or trapped by the circumstances of employment, it was a study in hypocrisy.

Big Sissy Bob, nursing an impressive set of black eyes and swollen nose, stood there, dishing out his best self-righteous anger, though unconvincingly, as he winced in pain. A large safety pin holding the tear in his coat just topped off one of the most pathetic sights I had seen in a while. He looked more like the tattletale stool pigeon who had his clock cleaned than the bully prison guard he so desperately projected to others. I didn’t know whether to laugh or feel sorry for him.

The assistant governor formally read the charges against me as I smacked my lips with each offense and blew Bob a kiss. I thought he was going to pop a blood vein and die right there on the spot. I’ve never seen someone so red, so mad, and so humiliated in all my life. I didn’t hear a whole lot about “Bob the Bully” after that. It didn’t take long for the whole prison to know the truth about his “toughness.”

My parting prize was a five-day vacation in the punishment block, in effect, trading one solitary confinement for another. Whoop-tee-doo. A man becomes reckless and fearless in the face of having nothing to lose.

The prison would learn that it had to go back to the drawing board and invent something new for men who had nothing to lose. In the end, though, prison bureaucrats, guards, and administrators would have their cruelty come back to haunt them, just as the evil deeds the prisoners had committed inevitably would come to haunt them. No man can dismiss this truth, and even the atheist must, in the end, come to admit: God is not mocked.

...Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap...  
Galatians 6:7

**A Patriot's Reward**

Four white walls entomb my soul,  
One green door shut tight,  
A floor that's painted black as coal,  
Lit up by neon light.

This is where I'm forced to live,  
Exist, from year to year.  
There's no emotion left to give,  
Not for a single tear.

My country has abandoned me,  
Tho' grizzly deeds I done  
For Ulster, so she might be free,  
From bomb and rebel's gun.

To keep the link with Britain's shores  
I volunteered to fight.  
I gave my very best and more  
In battles, day and night.

Anti-terror was my game,  
Eye for eye my pledge;  
Vengeance for our dead and lame;  
By gun or knife's honed edge.

Now Britain has imprisoned me,  
A champion of her cause!  
And gives my weeks of solitary,  
Like gifts from Santa Claus!

I feel betrayed by British hand,  
Back-stabbed by British knife—  
For fighting hard, for Ulster's land,  
I've forfeited my life!

Now doomed to spend my life within  
These four white walls obscene;

To gaze upon barbed wire and tin  
‘Til death shall intervene;

In winter’s dark and windy nights,  
Whilst listening to the rain,  
One question tortures, burns, and bites,  
“Would I do it all again?”  
“Would I do it all again?”

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton, 1978

## Breakfasts, Bath Times, and Bibles

*To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the Heaven; a time to be born, and a time to die; and time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and time to gather stones together...a time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away...*

*Ecclesiastes 3:1–6*

H-block was abuzz over my latest exploits, and I was “drummed” back to the wing with cheering and the metal clanging of cups and plates on the cell bars. If possible, they would have given me a ticker tape parade and carried me in on their shoulders—such was the jubilation of Big Bad Bob’s downfall.

I heard later through the torpedo tube intercom system that the other guards had actually begun to be a little more civil to the blanket protestors in appreciation of the demise of a bully even they detested. Time moved on, though, and it was long before any gratitude dissolved and the mistreatment returned with renewed passion.

The long days of solitary confinement and the blanket protest trudged on for another month before the next inevitable clash. It was almost a welcome event, given the tedious monotony of staring at four white walls day after day with life just passing you by. It’s a rotten choice between maddening boredom and chaos.

During the protest, my days were split into four main time periods. First thing each morning at 7:00 a.m., the cell doors would be

opened one at a time by a prison guard. The hated “blanket orderlies” would slide a plate of breakfast cereal and a mug of vile prison tea into the cell on the floor. Only after careful examination of both, assuring that no rat dung or “vim” (scouring powder) was part of the fare, would I commence consuming my meager feast.

The Maze was famous for its opulent rats that were kept plump with scraps of bread from the prisoners. In return, the rats provided some entertainment as we watched them scurry about the prison yard through our cell windows.

The rats invaded H-block and, of course, ate anything that even remotely resembled food, so there was never a shortage of rat droppings that seemed to find their way into the cornflakes and oats on a frequent basis. Whether they got there by natural occurrence or with a little help from guards or orderlies seemed to have an obvious answer, given that when they were on the meal plates, they seemed to be perfectly camouflaged under the food. It took a diligent inspection of each meal to keep from getting a mouth full of rat crap with your breakfast cereal.

The “vim in the tea” was more difficult to detect. The caked-on scouring powder at the bottom of the mug would only be discovered after drinking most of the contents, which was too late to counter the nauseating effects.

After breakfast, two cells at a time would be opened by four or five screws to allow two inmates a trip to the slop house to empty their portable plastic urinals. The contents of the urinal were dumped down the Belfast sink, and some vim was sprinkled inside to kill germs and somewhat cover up the disgusting smell, which was made worse by the close confinement of the solitary cells.

The two inmates would then return the urinals to their cells and get a towel before visiting the open washroom that consisted of eight hand washbasins, three toilets, and three shower cubicles. Each inmate was allowed to wash once a day in the hand washbasins but could only shower once a week. To compensate, we learned to wash our body, head to toe, using the hand washbasins, much to the chagrin of the guards who simply wanted us back in our cells as quickly as possible.

Some of the screws would try to embarrass a prisoner into washing faster by standing near them and staring at them while they washed. It was the usual psychological battle that we countered with making sure to put on a full show of washing every inch of our body as suggestively as possible, even winking and flirting with any guard who chose to play the game. Most of the time, it was the guard who ended up being embarrassed, though there was no doubt that some of the more modest and sensitive prisoners could not withstand the embarrassment. For those of us with no shame, it was a man's world and a man's game, and we showed no constraint in the vulgarities presented to our tormentors.

For the blanket protestors, personal hygiene was of paramount importance in contrast to the IRA inmates who refused to use the toilets and instead chose to soil their cells with their own excrement and pour urine out on the floors. The smell in the IRA wings was beyond description, the result of which was a kind of shared misery. We were suffering and if we could make the guards and prison administration suffer a little too, all the better.

While we could empathize and understand the suffering of the IRA prisoners given that we too were political prisoners, we would not lower ourselves to the level of self-abasement they employed. The morning wash time was almost sacred to us.

With breakfast and the morning wash time complete, I would begin the period of my daily incarceration reading the only book I was allowed: a prison-issued King James Bible that nineteenth-century prison reformation had legislated that each British inmate be given.

Correct thy son, and he shall give thee rest; yea, he shall  
give delight unto thy soul. Where there is no vision, the people  
perish; but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.

Proverbs 29:17–18

Regardless of the state of punishment—solitary confinement, protests, general population—in accordance with prison rules, I was allowed this Bible, and it could not be taken from me as part of any consequence or sentence. The very fact that it could *not* be taken from me appealed to my rebellious, antiauthority spirit.

I had been denied virtually every other privilege available for almost two years while on remand, awaiting trial, and now as a blanket protestor. I read the Bible diligently for one simple and honest reason: I had little else to pass the long, monotonous hours in solitary confinement.

I must admit with all candor that I really had no particular interest in the Bible or Christianity. I saw “church” and “Jesus” as something for “religious people,” the “good” people of the upper and middle business class of society. As far as I was concerned, it wasn’t for “real” people who worked for a living and certainly not for a lower-class sinner nobody, like me.

I remember beginning to read this Bible in early 1978 when I met a strange little lady named Gladys Blackburn, who is now deceased. I was sitting in solitary confinement, brooding over my life, when my cell door opened and in walked this thin little dwarf of a woman, gray-headed, with piercing, honest eyes.

“Good morning, young man. I’m Gladys Blackburn of the board of visitors. Could I have a moment of your time?”

Unaccustomed to sincere politeness, I muttered curiously, “Suit yourself. What do you want with me?” which led her to confidently take a seat on my wood-plank bed, take out a Bible, and begin reading as I loomed large over her, apparently without any anxiety on her part.

She read from Psalms 38: “I said I will take heed to my ways...deliver me from all my transgressions; make me not the reproach of the foolish.”

Finished, she looked straight up at me and asked, “Does that not sound like something you would say, son?”

I was a bit shocked at her directness, not sure how to respond to someone from the prison actually engaging me in real conversation rather than barking insults or instruction at me. Nevertheless, I felt my usual need to put on a tough exterior and muttered back, “No harm to you, Mrs. (she immediately corrected me with a “Miss!”)—Miss—but I am down here on solitary confinement for fighting the prison system you represent. I have no time for your preaching. I’m fine as I am. Thank you.”

I now know it was love that coerced this waif of a woman to look up at me with genuine pity as she stood to walk briskly out of the cell. "I'll pray for you anyway, son." And with that, she was off to the next prisoner as my cell door slammed shut.

Over the years, I had stood my ground against abusive guards, fighting the toughest of them to a stalemate. I had engaged in verbal altercations with authorities and was never at a loss for words to battle with. However, this frail little woman had rattled me from the inside out and left me standing there all alone, completely puzzled.

Assured that no prison guards were watching, I took out the old prison-issued Bible for the first time and began to look through the pages with nothing more than plain old curiosity. I thought to myself that maybe I should read some of this book since loyalists were supposed to be Protestants after all. Thus began my Bible-reading routine, which was filled with deep inner torment, self-discovery, and often, sheer pleasure. I reminded myself often that I wasn't "religious"; it was just the only way I had to kill time.

Another way of killing time was with rigorous physical exercise in my cell. Having spent most of 1977 and 1978 in solitary confinement, I had plenty of time and opportunity to stay in shape for my next inevitable scrap with the prison guards. I was only allowed one hour in the tiny exercise yard each day, so I had to do most of my working out in my cell.

I would do endless amounts of push-ups in various positions: feet raised, on my knuckles, raised off the floor on my bed blocks, as well as sit-ups and dips from the edge of my bed. The exercise routines I had learned from the boys' brigade and the sea training school came in handy as I learned to add variety into my workouts. Calisthenics, using my water jug as a dumbbell, and running in place kept me in great fighting shape.

The diligent self-discipline caused great consternation for many of the prison guards who were quite fat and lazy with their boring jobs that required little from them on day-to-day basis. It was obvious to both prisoner and guard that our physical superiority gave us great advantage in any violent confrontation. This selfish motive doubled my intensity and loyalty to physical fitness.



During the blanket protest, I would exercise naked and became so accustomed to it that I wouldn't even bother to look up when the observation panel creaked open. I considered myself invisible and stopped even thinking of the guards as human beings. I was just a number to them, and they became nonhuman to me, not deserving—in my estimation—of any sort of respect or regard.

I didn't feel the need to go looking for trouble; there was plenty available without seeking it, but when it came, I wanted to be prepared to give as much trouble back as I possibly could. I had absolutely nothing to lose, and for "The Maniac," there would be no surrender, no quarter, no backing down.

The loyalist protestors had vowed to neither conform to the policies applied to criminals (we were political prisoners, not criminals), nor to be passive in the face of violence. It got back to me through the prison grapevine that non-protesting prisoners had begun to take bets on what would happen first: McClinton would kill a guard, or the guards would kill him. Life is cheap among "lifers" in prison, and it was just a matter of time before something had to give. That time came in April 1979...

Still on protest, my life was in torment because of my Bible reading. I had read through the entire Bible, starting with Genesis, much of it not making any sense to me at all, but some of the stories in the Old Testament were fascinating. Kings, politics, wars, judgment—the history of Israel was filled with intrigue that I could relate to and understand.

I read with great personal understanding the grievous sins of King David, the lusting after Bathsheba, and the subsequent adultery and murder of her husband. There wasn't a whole lot of theological difficulty in that story of human weakness. This was a story about real life—a tragedy that I could fully understand.

I had no trouble relating to this David fellow and his fallen nature. I had been there and done that and knew exactly what a destroyed life looked like. This was real life in all its honest ugliness.

*Hmm, I thought to myself. Maybe this book is for real people after all.* I kept reading day after day, slowly but surely coming to understand something about my own life and the general purpose of life itself. I recognized the wrath of a holy God who cannot ignore sin

and yet seemed to forgive his people over and over again, putting them on the right path.

Yet as my knowledge of the Bible increased, my inner torment increased even more. It was as if my very soul was intensely burning and flames shot out of my eyes. I was a real loser in the eyes of this almighty God, and there was no doubt the flames of eternal hell were being stoked for me.

...Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.

Romans 10:17

And when He (God the Spirit) is come, He will reprove (convict) the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment. Of sin because they believe not on Me (Jesus Christ); of righteousness, because I go to My Father; and ye see Me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world (Satan) is judged.

John 16:8–11

Outwardly, I kept the maniac mask on, and no one knew that inwardly I was seething and tormented. I was pumped and primed for what was about to happen next.

## Fifteen to One

April 7, 1979: I was in cell nine at Maze Prison, taking part in the loyalist blanket protest. The beast known as “Maniac McClinton” was to be unleashed on the beast known as “H-block.”

In an eerie prelude that seemed to foretell the conflict, the skies were dark with storm clouds and flashes of lightning. Trouble was brewing, as I could feel the ghosts of my past stirring themselves into a frenzy of demonic harmony. I look back now and realize that Satan had no compassion on me but, for thirty-two years, had used all the circumstances of my life to manipulate me for his purposes.

The evil of man had created the social conditions, poverty, and deprivation that prepared the young lives of its victims for the wicked decisions of terrorism and taking life later in adulthood. Regardless, the responsibility for those decisions was, and still remains, mine alone.

Through my growing knowledge of the Scripture, Satan was about to lose me as one of his servants, and looking back, I don't think the powers of hell were too happy about it. I believe the events of April 7 were a desperate, hellish attempt to stall or reverse my journey into God's hands.

The evening of April 6, I had written an ode of pure, unadulterated hatred about the H-block. I had scratched it down with a stolen pen on my prison-issued stationary, otherwise known as toilet paper. I called the other prisoners to their cell doors for a recitation.

**The Beast That Is H-Block**

You have heard many tales of the world's famous jails,  
But this tale might come as a shock!  
For, it's here, at the Maze, that a monster was raised,  
And it goes by the name of H-Block.

Sure, they leveled the ground for some miles all around,  
Then built it with wire, brick, and steel.  
As it rose from the mire spewing forth it's barbed wire,  
Britain swore it would bring us to heel!

They invented as cell, that's a pure white-walled hell,  
With a purpose that burns a man's soul.  
Made to make the mind bend, never ever to mend,  
'Til the man's in his grave oh so cold.

At the start it worked well, as statistics will tell,  
The Beast had its captives all beat.  
Until out of the gloom, all the misery and doom,  
Came a Protest that knows no defeat!

Prisoners threw off their clothes, blue-stripped shirts; belts 'n' bows;  
A grey blanket they donned that was coarse.  
No more orders they took, not from no System's Book,  
Yes, by God, we're a potent wee force!

With psychology's tricks, beating prisoners with sticks,  
And all sorts of stunts to get at us  
The great Beast's in a rage, all within its steel cage—  
To deny us political status.

Taking all they could take for our Protest to break,  
Guards were thinking themselves oh so clever;  
But we've bent not an inch, never once seen to flinch—  
We're prepared for to protest forever!

Now, the time is at hand, when this Beast in our land  
Must go down to the Pit n'er to rise,  
Then we all shall go free, "Prod" and "Mick," you and me,  
Peace at last under Ulster's blue skies.

Soon the tables will turn and all H-Block will burn,  
Then this Beast will go down mid the slaughter;  
And the fate of its screws for their traitorous dues?  
Execution! Then hung, drawn, and quartered!

‘Til that time here we’ll bide, one for all, side by side,  
On the Blanket—to hell with them all!  
For we know in our hearts, that we’ve each played our part,  
So this Beast that is H-Block must fall.

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton, 1979

We all thoroughly enjoyed the distraction and the emotional stimulation. My hatred for Maze Prison was deep, pure, and dangerous. Writing was my emotional outlet. A physical outlet was soon to follow.

The next morning, several of the younger UFF blanket protestors had family visits scheduled when the screws decided to implement yet another security measure meant to further torment us and break our will concerning the protest.

Prisoners Inky, Moo, and Wes had their monthly statutory visits fatefully arranged this day when prison officers entered Moo’s cell first with a brown paper bag that contained his gray prison uniform. Moo donned the uniform, walked out of his cell, and proceeded toward the end of the wing to load up on the bean tin, only to be blocked halfway up the aisle in front of an empty prison cell.

“Mirror search, boy!” came the command from Horsehead, suddenly calling every prisoner to the attention of this confrontation. Up until that time, the mirror search had only been attempted *after* a visit, not before. This sudden departure from the normal routine was obviously a new twist in the struggle between authority and inmate.

The young man was forced into the cell and made to disrobe as he called out to the other prisoners that he was being forced into a mirror search. We could hear the kid being pushed and slapped around by the guards when he eventually shouted out in pain after

being punched in the gut by Horsehead. They manhandled him through the entire degrading mirror search.

They flung him up against a wall—as evidenced by a loud, dull *thud*—as one of the more detested screws, “Laurence of Arabia,” was overheard telling the kid, “Get your uniform on and go have a nice visit with your mommy.”

All four guards laughed and made great fun of the youngster. I could feel the rage rippling from my head down to my toes as I screamed some obscenities at the screws. My outrage only caused them to laugh and insult the boy more. I paced back and forth in my cell like a possessed animal.

Moo got his uniform back on and went down to the bean tin for the ride over to see his family. Meanwhile, Inky and Wes got the ultimatum: submit to the mirror search or give up your family visit. Neither complied. Inky was sent to the punishment block, and Wes was denied his visit. Horsehead made it clear: refuse the mirror search, no visit. That was the new rule—take it or leave it.

The blanket protestors were totally committed to our cause, and none of us would willingly submit to the mirror search, which effectively ended the “statutory” family visits for us. It would be total separation from the outside world. No pain, no gain.

“Isaac!” I shouted through the torpedo tube hole. Isaac got his ear down to the hole to hear my plan. “This morning’s assault on our three young men has to be exposed, mate. It can’t go unnoticed. As soon as the screws open my cell door to allow me to go up for a wash, I’m jumping them. Whatever happens after that, make sure you guys get a message out to headquarters and tell the men out there I want quick retaliation for this morning’s events. Okay?”

Isaac tried to talk me out of it, but I was already past the point of no return. Regardless, I had no time to even consider a change of mind as my cell door suddenly opened, and the violence was about to commence.

Guard O’Neil stepped inside and nervously, almost reasonably, called out “Right, Mac. Slop out,” signaling my turn to go the slop house to empty my urinal and take my morning wash. I groaned inwardly when I saw O’Neil because this guy was pretty civil in how he treated prisoners. I hated for him to be my victim, but my blood

was already boiling, and unlucky for him, he was in the wrong place on the wrong day.

“Did you hit those youngsters today?” I asked him. In an instant, I could sense what was going on inside his mind as he embraced the risk he sensed was present. Prison guards could take up to six months off work with full pay, plus an average of typical overtime pay, if they were injured by an inmate while on active duty. This particular perk created an atmosphere where guards routinely antagonize prisoners in the hoping of getting a minor injury and six months vacation.

On the other hand, if a prison guard antagonized an inmate without incident, the prison guard “won.” It was a win-win for the screws.

O’Neil gazed intently at me as he replied, “No. I did not hit any prisoners, McClinton, but—” He paused for effect. “I was there. I followed orders to conduct the mirror search. Prisoners will do what they are told. Including you. Simple as that.”

His face and posture bowed up ever so slightly, daring me, and it was just too much for my already-enraged spirit to ignore. *Thud!* My headbutt landed squarely on O’Neil’s nose, and it dropped him like a rock. On cue, the war had kicked off. All hell—both internally in me and outwardly with the prison guards—had broken loose.

Only one guard had been assigned “slop out” duty that day, while the other three were down in cell one smoking (cell one was designated as an “office” in each wing). The only other guard in the immediate vicinity was a young, plump recruit who had run up huffing and puffing to respond to the groans of O’Neil lying at my feet. Once he saw me, he lamely charged, and I simply sidestepped his bumbling attempt and sent him sprawling headlong past me. He fell, sliding on the highly polished floor, keys jangling.

The three smoke-break officers suddenly bolted out of cell one, hit the alarm, and charged up to join the fight. Three on one—they hardly stood a chance.

After a couple minutes of violent punching and the guards kicking at me with their heavy boots, I ended up wrestling two of them down to the floor. Two more guards arrived, making it a total of five against one. Now the odds were evening up. We were all punching, ducking,

kicking, and diving around. I was hammering away as if my life depended on it, which it nearly did.

Soon the five guards got the upper hand on me, with two of them holding my legs and one on each arm, latched on like the world was coming to an end. They weren't offering any mercy, and they sure weren't going to get any from me, and they knew it. The fifth guard, O'Neil, who had somewhat recovered from the initial attack, had joined in and managed to get me in a headlock from behind, squeezing hard on my throat with his muscled forearm.

I could not breathe at all, yet that did not stop my manic, violent expression and struggle. The last thing I remember seeing before passing out was the frightened look on the guards' faces. I was sure that they were executing me on the spot, and oddly, the last thing I remember thinking was how bad O'Neil's breath stank.

I was dragged into an empty cell at the bottom of the wing, where I had been choked out and left on the floor as they ran out. I regained consciousness and leapt at the slamming steel door. "No surrender!" I screamed in rage through the crack in the door. Suddenly, it was deathly quiet.

"Kenny, are you all right?" came a call from the next cell through the torpedo hole. "It's me, Big S."

Big S was an old friend from the Shankill Battalion of UFF Freedom Fighters in Belfast. He seemed surprised I was alive at all after hearing the ruckus, and I didn't feel much alive with my throat practically swollen shut after the strangulation. After a belabored conversation, Big S poured some water through the hole into my hands, which I gladly lapped up to soothe my burning throat. Looking back, I realized it was the guards' fear of my rage that had caused them to react to such an extreme—and it wasn't over yet.

After a few noisy minutes of clanging steel doors and the stomping of heavy black boots, I heard a fellow protestor call out, "Get ready, Kenny! They're sending in the heavy squad for ya!"

The observation panel banged open, and two menacing eyes appeared through the slit. After a moment, a key clicked in the lock, and the door swung wide open. With defiance firmly pasted on my bloodied, bearded face, I waited for the inevitable.



“Right, McClinton! Out, you stinking tramp!” Laurence of Arabia was leading the heavy squad. I moved with purpose toward him and the open cell door, which caused him to retreat out into the hallway. I quickly surveyed the situation just outside my cell. A dozen or so guards (fifteen to be exact, I would find out later) lined up in two rows, some with their hats and ties already off, batons raised, ready to strike. They obviously wanted me to “run the gauntlet,” which meant passing between the two rows of guards while they each punched and beat me from both sides as I passed. That would lead me to be cornered at the end of the wing where they would no doubt finish the job.

“Run, you bastard,” Laurence shouted. I purposely *walked* toward the line with my chin held defiantly high, slow and deliberate, looking them straight in the eye as I approached. I was identifying each of them for future reference, and they knew exactly what I was doing.

I watched carefully for the first physical reaction; it predictably came from Horsehead. The belligerent and nasty guard had already survived numerous run-ins with me, and given the current circumstances, I could see that for him, this was payback time. He was going to get his day of reckoning for all the times I had embarrassed him or gotten the best of him.

More than actually seeing it, I sensed Horsehead drawing back with his fist, ready to draw first blood. My eyes were racing and dancing over the entire scene, trying to develop any chance of advantage for the impending brawl. Just as Horsehead threw his best roundhouse punch squarely at my head, I rolled underneath it, stepped toward him, and buried my fist in his stomach, causing him to double over in slack-jawed pain.

The other guards quickly closed ranks around me, but before they could begin to pummel me, I grabbed Horsehead by the throat and had full intentions of sinking my teeth into his large nose. However, I grabbed more uniform than throat, and I as tried to pull him toward me, his clip-on tie tore loose, and it sent me sprawling off balance, backward into the other guards. As I backpedalled, trying to regain my balance, Horsehead jumped to his feet and pursued me, throwing wild punches.

I quickly regained my balance and pounced at him, delivering a full body tackle that forced him back into my solitary cell. We both

crashed down on the floor. Horsehead was on bottom now, with a naked prisoner straddling him.

“Give it up, McClinton. You’re out numbered! We’ve got you,” he threatened. As the other guards entered the cell and began to rain down baton blows on my naked back, I grabbed Horsehead by the ears, and with my devilish eyes just over his, I said, “Yeah, but I’ve got *you*.”

After the first few blows, it became an eerie affair. I really didn’t feel anything, even though I was fully aware of the group of guards beating the stuffing out of me. I think that the brutality of my life, and the intensity of my hatred and rage just shorted out any feeling I had. I was completely awake when they dragged me off Horsehead and out of my cell. I was fully conscious when he and Laurence hoisted me up off the floor by my ankles and banged my head on the concrete floor even while the others were still kicking me with their heavy black boots.

I was even aware that someone kept striking the bottom of my feet with a baton that was causing sharp, shooting pain in my ankles and legs. Even still, it all seemed to be happening in slow motion silence—some sort of dreamy unreality. It all came to a rude, rushing halt, though, when one of the brave officers kicked me squarely in the gut, causing me to frantically lose my breath for what seemed like an eternity.

The guards dragged me out between A and B-wing by my ankles, back scraping across the floor, with the guards still competing for who could get in another kick or punch. Somehow I managed to suck in enough breath to yell, “No surrender!” at them and laugh at them as I spit and sputtered blood out of my battered mouth. I was now throbbing in pain and covered head to toe with marks of my beating.

And then it was over. Everything stopped. The prison guards seemed pale as they loosed me and backed away. Slowly, agonizingly, I stood to my feet and smiled at them as they waited to hear what The Maniac would say next.

Looking over my injuries and then looking over my attackers with eyes that were already swelling and turning black, I said, “Well, ladies, try to explain *this* to our human rights society!” I stood there laughing

at them as the bean tin arrived to transport me to the punishment block.

The guards knew what I knew. Somebody's head was going to roll over the mistreatment of the three young prisoners that day and now the blatant unmerciful beating of a naked prisoner outnumbered fifteen to one. By provoking them, I had called attention to the ill treatment of prisoners in H-block, which was already an issue for many on the outside. It was a huge political and moral victory for the prisoners. The newspapers in Belfast and beyond would have a field day with the story.

I limped into the bean tin, barely able to stand physically but riding an emotional high. With the taste of blood in my mouth, I once again determined that I would out-suffer anything they could throw at me. I was in serious pain, but it was soothed by the triumph I felt at the moment.

## The “Maniac” Tamed?

Four bruiser screws awaited my arrival in the bean tin with the purpose of beating any remaining rebellion out of me. There are certain types of men that seem to enjoy kicking a dog when it is already down, and Maze Prison seemed to have a proliferation of them in the 1970s. These lowlifes gave a bad name to the otherwise decent ranks of the Prison Officers’ Association (POA).

Stepping into the bean tin, these four mugheads immediately commenced to push me around, with one trying to slap my face and another trying to punch me. I greeted the slapper politely by landing a roundhouse squarely on his mouth, and with that, all four jumped in to pummel me.

I figured these bullies assumed the earlier melee had softened me up, but that would be a short-lived misconception. Violence only fuelled me further. Hats, uniforms, and blood went flying, and only when the senior officer stepped in did the chaos pause. He realized that they were wasting their time, and of course, I didn’t pass up the opportunity to give them mocking laughs and grins all the way back to the block.

I gingerly sat down in my cell and looked up at the faceless ceiling, awaiting the inevitable onset of pain. “Nothing has changed...” I said to whoever might be off in the heavens listening.

### **H-Block! The Abode of the Living Dead**

Through lonely days in solitude  
Encased in white-walled tombs;  
Our souls well steeped in misery,  
We pace these penal rooms.

Five small steps from wall to door,  
Five small paces back;  
Amidst the blinding neon glare  
On a floor of funeral black.  
One barred window in the wall,  
A door of steel that's stout,  
Keeping gloom and heartaches in,  
And love, and freedom out!

A coarse grey blanket for a suit,  
No shoes upon our feet;  
The Holy Bible for to read—  
One bed, one pot, one seat.

But these things aren't all we possess  
Within this man-made Hell!  
We have faith and pride and dignity—  
And some self-respect as well!

We are fed with hate for breakfast.  
At lunch? Indignity!  
Then we dine on degradation  
With insulting quips for tea.

In a world of peak-capped demons  
Where red-tape has bound us tight,  
And Satan wears a pin-striped suit  
As he demonstrates his might.

Our long days are spent in hoping  
That, perhaps, one day real soon,  
The outside world will hear our cries  
And free us from this doom.

Until that day we'll stand as one;  
Our strength will never fail;  
For there's enough defiance in our hearts  
To smash all H-Block jail!

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton, 1979

You have to live the life to understand that no amount of beatings and degradation can separate the terrorism from the terrorist. Psychological and physical torture only enflame the rage and can never make meekness the trademark of a maniac.

No, it would take something much more powerful, much more transforming, to change this thirty-two-year-old committed rebel. Even I understood the principle "Who can bring something clean out of the unclean?" (Job 14:4)

The next morning, I was so sore and stiff that I simply could not get out of bed. I had made it to the toilet a couple of times only to discover I was bleeding internally. I urinated blood for two straight days from my bruised kidneys.

Despite my best efforts, I could not get up, and the effort caused me to scream inside. I wouldn't give them the satisfaction of hearing actual screams. My ribs, back, stomach, chest, arms, and legs were covered with black-and-purple wounds. I had some crushed bones in my toes from the baton beating when they hung me upside down, and my feet were badly swollen. My lips, nose, and forehead were bruised and swollen. One eye was completely swelled shut. I was a mass of throbbing pain (I really showed them, huh?).

I tried to mentally divorce the pain to no avail. I bit my lip and tried to figure out a way to get up before the guards showed up to gloat. It was not to be. I couldn't get up, period. I just lay there when they showed up. The best I could muster was a glare with my one open eye.

One look at me got the prison physician, Dr. Ben, summoned immediately—not that the screws gave a rat's behind about my condition. They were worried about a prisoner dying in their block from their beating, not to mention the hassle of dealing with a dead body during their shift.

Dr. Ben was an old army doc, typical of who the prisons employed. Like Miss Margaret from my boys' home days, Dr. Ben was detested for his adherence to the irresponsible prison policies, earning him the title of "white angel of death," symbolized by his pure white hair and Nazi demeanor.

Dr. Ben's reputation was immediately confirmed by his indifference to my injuries. "What happened? Fall down some stairs?" he asked without even making eye contact, knowing full well there weren't any staircases in the entire prison. After a cursory glance at my condition, he gave me a couple of aspirin but without the "call me in the morning" part.

Slamming my cell door, he instructed the guards to make sure my urinal was emptied and the blood washed off, more concerned about incriminating evidence than whether or not I would survive. He left the area whistling an "I'm just doing my job" tuneless tune.

I drifted in and out of awareness over the next few days, making my memory of the experience pretty vague. I was delirious with pain, unable to eat, and unaware of time. Reality just blurred together into one long haze of confusion with dreamy memories of people looking in on me—some laughing, some making cruel jokes, a couple of people genuinely concerned. None of it mattered or registered. I was in too much pain to care.

There must have been at least one person who truly became concerned, because someone finally came in and gave me a real examination. I have a foggy memory of a compassionate voice asking me to try to stand up so I could get to the medical room. Another person was enlisted to help carry me there and put me on a couch. I found out later that the guy who helped, Smokey Mo, was a committed Christian.

An examination revealed severely bruised rather than broken ribs. Smokey Mo would talk calmly to me as he treated my injuries, ordering another guard to fix me a mug of hot tea and sugar (evidently it helps calm the shock to the nervous system or something like that).

I found it extremely difficult to sit up and drink the tea, not just because of the battered ribs, but also because of the hot liquid burning the raw wounds in my mouth. Nevertheless, the sweet

mixture was marvelous and soothing as it dribbled down my parched throat. It was then that I realized I would survive—barely—to fight another day.

Smokey Mo produced a medical body sheet and began to document the location of my injuries on the diagram of a human figure. He would examine me, then mark the chart with a number, and write a brief description detailing twenty-six separate injuries by the time he finished. Those were only the serious injuries, with many more minor injuries being ignored.

Legally, though doubtfully, that medical report should still be on file at Maze Prison. A couple of years after the incident, a judge at Newtownards, County Down, refused to believe a story about fifteen guards beating a prisoner while hanging him naked, upside down by his feet. The account was dismissed as lies and exaggerated propaganda, even though dozens of prisoners who were incarcerated at Maze in 1979 all know it is completely true.

Regardless, as soon as I was reasonably recovered from the beating, I received twenty-two days of solitary confinement for “attacking prison guards.” Talk about adding insult to injury. Even the assistant governor appeared disgusted over this farce. In my twisted way of thinking at that time, my spirits and morale soared. The worse they treated me without breaking me, the more victorious I felt.

At my hospitality suite in the punishment block, I was kept company by a shiny black earwig for several days. We had a grand time. I would catch him and then let him go, over and over. I would get a good laugh when he reared back to attack me with his tiny pinchers. His bravery entertained and inspired me. I admired his courage in the face of overwhelming superiority. How curious that a bug captivated me in such a way. I let it crawl right up on my bruised face, and it would sit within inches of my eye. I was amazed at its perfect, symmetrical body and its polished black armor. My little companion led me for the first time in my life to seriously contemplate all the wonders of creation, even the little creatures we routinely ignored and exterminated.

Looking back, I thank God for allowing me the time and privilege of befriending my little insect buddy, as it helped me understand how miniscule I am compared to an almighty Creator.



I awoke one day to find my brave companion had escaped through one of the many cracks and crevices—outside to freedom, I hoped. I later penned a poem to remind me of this experience:

**Ode to an Amorous Earwig**

Mid Space-age dungeon  
Chilled and bleak,  
By chance I sensed  
Your armour creak.  
Then turned my bearded  
Penal Face  
To slyly view  
Your earwig grace.

Not half a span away,  
No more,  
With scorpion motions  
Upon the floor,  
You minced precisely,  
Small, but free,  
Toward a mountain  
(That was me!)

With breath restrained  
And waiting eye,  
Observed a peering  
Penal Fly,  
That rubbed his hands  
Expectantly  
The outcome of our meet  
To see.

Your secret nearness  
Crossed my eyes.  
With daring sauce,  
To my surprise!  
You brushed my lips  
With feelers light  
Then spectred off  
In to the night.

You loving gesture  
Touched my heart!  
Your tiny kiss  
Made teardrops start  
To roll from lonely,  
Unloved eyes;  
Like lifelong lover's  
Last good-byes.

'Twas it a dream?  
I could not tell!  
Until the fly,  
My eye befell;  
That silent witness of we three;  
An amorous earwig,  
Fly, and me.

That close-confinement  
Gnat sat dumb,  
Except for one  
Fine winged hum;  
As off he went  
Through micro-door;  
Unloved...alone...  
I'm left once more.

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton, 1981

With my entertainment now escaped, I was left with absolutely nothing to do and lots of time to do it. Providentially, my eyes fell on the prison-issued King James Bible, and I began to read it every day.

Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.  
Romans 10:17

# Unshackled

A wave of adulation greeted me when I returned to the blanket protest on H-block Six with every inmate aware of my death cage match—battling fifteen guards while personally armed with only a towel.

Inmates from both sides of politics trumpeted their encouragement, whether they were part of the blanket protest or not. I received messages of support and congratulations across the board for taking a stand against the beating of the three young loyalists. I think they would have put me on their shoulders and had a parade if they could have!

Outwardly, it was exuberating. Inwardly...a whole different story.

I had many questions and confusion. If prisoners from both sides—IRA and loyalists—were so open in the support of my protests, why were they all wearing the hated monkey suit (prison uniform)? Why were they simply conforming to the prison rules that categorized them as criminals? It seemed like a whole lot of hypocrisy and of men wanting the recognition but not paying the price. A whole lot of guys wanted to be martyrs, but few were willing to die.

Several things had occurred on H-block Six while I was gone. One of my friends, Isaac, had broken out his windows and ransacked his cell in protest of my beating. He got a three-day resort package in the punishment block for that incident.

Big Alex of the Ulster Volunteer Force punched out two naïve guards who ventured into his cell shortly after my beating—one of them being Dangerous Dessie. He and another screw decided to

conduct a cell search and instead found themselves at the mercy of Big Alex, who would have beat them to a pulp had screams from the panicked guards not resulted in help arriving. Alex got a good beating himself as he was dragged to the punishment cells.

In the meantime, the remaining loyalist blanket protestors received orders from Ghandi (from the Tiger Bay area in Belfast) to refuse all prison food. They managed to hold out until outside newspapers finally got wind and published some stories about the brutal treatment in Maze Prison.

Young “Inky”; “Moo”; “Wes”; “Big S from the West”; “Cokey Mc,” from the coastal town of Larne, with another of his townsmen, “Stoker”; Norman, a UFF brigadier from South Belfast; “Hammy,” from my own Shankill C. Company UFF; and “Tonto,” a second UVF member on the protest, had all suffered in one way or another since the day of my beating—yet their Protestant spirits were as strong as ever.

On a political note, it is the genuine commitment of men like these who are willing to suffer for what they believe in that will keep the six counties of Ulster from ever being absorbed into the Catholic Irish Republic. You simply cannot use force and get real change against people who are willing to give all to a belief.

Acting on my communication, some of the UFF leadership in the Shankill Battalions on the outside took action. They captured some journalists and took them to a secret location in West Belfast, where they came face-to-face with a group of UFF chiefs all masked in full combat attire, weapons assembled, and surrounded by a fully armed entourage.

The inner council read a prepared statement that put a death threat out to all Maze Prison officers that were involved in the beating of loyalist prisoners on April 17, 1979. The journalists took notes and snapped photos of this show and left with copies of the prepared statement. It appeared in the newspapers the next day and sent waves of fear through the Maze Prison staff. There was immense pressure brought to bear on the guilty guards by both the other prison staff and the prisoners. It would be a long time before any loyalist was beaten by a Maze Prison screw.

The prison governor made a prompt visit to my cell following the public threat by the UFF promising me a “full inquiry” by the prison

board and asking me to have the death threat against the guards rescinded. This request was met with my well-rehearsed standard answer: "As political prisoners, we demand political status for politically motivated actions. No quarter asked, no quarter given. No surrender."

The governor perused my bruised, unflinching face with sad eyes, shaking his head, unable to comprehend such unshakeable commitment to a cause. He turned, walked slowly away, and very quietly closed my cell door. I sat and thought deeply about the whole matter.

I knew there would be continued battles. I knew that violence begat more violence. I knew the two wrongs didn't make a right. I knew mutual respect was the only key to any progress or civility in conflict. I also knew that I could not budge one inch on any vital issue when it came to achieving political recognition within the system. We would suffer, protest, and hold fast in our fight against IRA terrorists, even while our British government not only stood by and did nothing to defend us but proceeded to call us criminals in the process.

Our bodies were in prison, but our spirits were free. I thought. As always, I was left alone with my conflicting thoughts.

### **Mother Ulster**

Within your realm so fair, first I was spawned.  
Your red hand sun surged through these vital veins.  
'Twas thy free soul which surely forged our bond;

My milk, from which I suckled, was your rain.  
You weaned me wild with winds of Northern song,  
To force me to be fierce 'gainst weakly will.  
Your stand, ALONE, taught this heart to stand strong;  
To trust in God, and keep on trusting still.

My Cruthin cultured roots you've buried deep,  
Fast locked with mine, entwined, mid soul and soil.  
Proud Province, may thy Ulster sons n'er sleep,  
Whilst thy soil's scourged with terror-torn turmoil;

Nor fail thee in thy hour of direst need  
Whilst wilely Gaels seek thy soil to o'ercome.  
Thy Cruthin-blooded sons shall each drop bleed -  
Before we lose our Mother Ulster Home!

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton

I had no visitors from April to August of 1979, unwilling to submit to the mirror search that preceded each visit. Over time, I healed from all my injuries and trekked from my cell to the washroom with only a slight limp.

I returned to my days of solitary confinement, marking the time by routine events: breakfast, washroom, exercise, and Bible reading. It's not that I was particularly interested in the Bible, it just happened to be the only book at my disposal. Unknown to me at that time, the daily Bible reading would entirely change the rest of my life. The fact that Bible reading would change my life doesn't seem like such a revelation now, nor does it come across as particularly shocking to any mature believer. But to a non-believing terrorist convict, it never even entered my wildest imagination that reading the Bible was anything more than a way to pass the time.

Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Hebrews 4:11–12 (NKJV)

I read through the entire Old Testament and began to read the Gospels. I thought it strange that four different guys had written stories about the same thing, but as I read, I realized that each writer gave a different perspective on the account. That made sense to me, even with my limited reading skills, but the “thees” and “thous” of the King James Version made it more difficult for me to consume. Even so, I was getting a true understanding of the gospel message, even though I had no idea what the word *gospel* even meant!

Around that time, another prisoner named Tonto had received a copy of a Good News Bible from a family member, and I was able to borrow it. It went a long way toward helping me understand what I was reading, clarifying much of the archaic vocabulary in the King James Version. This clarification would have a long-term effect on both Tonto and me. Looking back, it is obvious that God's hand was orchestrating events exactly according to his timing.

The Old Testament's stories of war, political intrigue, and personal accounts were captivating reading; the New Testament message of Jesus Christ and salvation (the "good news") hit my mind like a thunderbolt!

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden,  
and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me,  
for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.  
For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."  
Matthew 11:28–30 (NKJV)

This confused me. It sounded great for religious people; for law-abiding, normal people; for "good" people—but what good was it for people like me fighting for the freedom of those religious people? And what good was it for murderers, terrorists, and gross sinners?

I had committed every sin and then some. I was ashamed of my poverty-stricken, deprived, decadent, violent life...a foul-mouthed, immoral sailor...a ruthless terrorist leader. And now a lifetime-convicted felon in solitary confinement. How could all that Bible stuff ever be meant for someone like me? I related fully with a term I came across: the "chief of sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15).

Surely this "easy yoke" and "light burden" was not meant for someone as evil as Kenny McClinton. Surely there was no rest for the soul of a chief sinner like me. It sounded too good to be true, and I was sure that it was. I continued to read:

Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God [the Bible].  
Romans 10:17

For whosoever shall call upon the Name of the Lord (Christ Jesus)  
shall be saved.  
Romans 10:13

Faith without works is dead.  
James 2:14–26

The last of these three verses was demonstrated by Mo, which opened the door in my heart to hear insight about the others. Through his compassionate medical care and subsequent living out of his faith, the concepts of salvation would begin to crystallize for me.

Reading had become difficult for me, as I had developed a nasty case of conjunctivitis in both eyes. The reflected neon light off the stark-white walls relentlessly invaded my pupils. I woke up each morning with eyes glued shut from all the gunk that would form on them at night. Once I did get them cleaned up and open, I found it very difficult to see and even more difficult to read.

The prison doctor had prescribed some eye ointment, and much to my dismay, I had to don the “monkey suit” every night to make the journey to the medical room for treatment. Being blind would not help my cause, so I considered it a necessary evil.

Mo treated me with the respect I considered mandatory, so we were able to have somewhat civil conversations. While rubbing ointment on my eyes, this committed Christian never missed a chance to rub in a little gospel message too, which was authenticated by his genuine concern for my welfare. It was truly to his credit that he tried to share his faith with me, even while tending to my physical needs. I took the opportunity to ask him some deep questions that my Bible reading had stirred in me.

His answers became a part of my slowly building faith—a faith that required time and soul searching on my part. I was beginning to wonder if God was interested in and able to save even a maniac like me. Over two years of solitary confinement gave me opportunity to continue routine Bible reading, unwittingly gaining crucial foundational knowledge of spiritual truth. However, instead of bringing me peace, it fuelled the fires of torment deep in my soul.

I continually asked myself probing questions and would have long spiritual conversations through the torpedo tube with Isaac.



Looking back, I now recognize my torment as the beginning of God convicting of sin, but it was a mystery to me at that point. It wasn't long before I was questioning everything in my world through what I was reading in the Bible.

I was able to pen some of those thoughts, feelings, and questions on to my toilet paper tablet using my stolen pen. I used some of my crude poems to try to sort out the tumult in my spirit. Here's what I wrote:

### **The Questionnaire of Salvation**

Hey you! Man in darkness, and you, maid of sin,  
Lend an ear to the word that I say.  
Would you care to be freed from your burden of guilt?  
Would you dare fight the Devil today?  
Have you searched all your life for just what you know not?  
Lacked a purpose, the Way yet unknown?  
Are you tired of your worry, your heartaches and grief?  
Are you wearied with living alone?  
Would you open your heart to the Master's light knock?  
Bid Him enter, forever to stay?  
Have you courage enough to call Jesus your own;  
And His life-giving statutes obey?  
Is your soul black and heavy, with gross sins of the past?  
Do the hot hobs of Hell seem too near?  
Is your mind now in turmoil o'er gambling, or booze?  
Does the grave make you quiver with fear?  
Are you deeply concerned at the state of your soul?  
Do you want to be cleansed from your sin?  
Does sincerity temper your choice to repent?  
Does your heart want sweet Jesus within?  
Do you dare answer, 'Yes!' to the questions here asked  
And be loosed from your chains here, today?  
If you do, ask the Savior, Christ Jesus, God's Son,  
To come into your heart, right away.

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton

The questions were childlike, even superficial, but I desired to know definitive answers to them before they ate away my insides. It was as though the devil himself was engaged in a tug-of-war for my sin-scarred soul. As the days passed and my reading continued, I instinctively knew that I would find no peace until I made a once-and-for-all decision one way or the other.

At that point, in 1979, the most common wager in the prison was who would die first: a prison guard or me. What the other prisoners didn't realize was that the weight of my sin seemed almost impossible to bear any longer. Time was running out for me. I felt I was on the verge of death.

In retrospect, with the benefit of what I now know as a Christian, I realize that God was bearing down on me with the full weight of conviction and sorrow for my wickedness. Something had to give, and I was about to take the most important step of my thirty-two-year-old life.

August 12, 1979. It was time.

I could not resist any longer. The Lord of the universe was calling me to receive his eternal salvation. I felt compelled to answer definitively. I knew then that his love extended even to lecherous men like me, and regardless of my answer to him, my life could never be the same.

I could take all that Man could throw at me, but Jesus Christ—that was different story. I could face the reality of a poverty-stricken, dysfunctional childhood. I could live up to my violence and debauchery. I could handle the fact that I was a terrorist. I had proven beyond doubt that I could withstand anything humans could dish out: punishment, beatings, imprisonment, humiliation. Nothing about life or man could humble the monster, McClinton.

But the love of Jesus? I was not prepared for that and had no defense against it.

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose

you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit,  
and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask  
the Father in My name He may give you.

John 15:13–16 (NKJV)

All the punishment and hardships of man had only hardened my heart further. Nothing in this world had remotely penetrated my stony resolve until I finally came face-to-face with the love of Christ, which melted my resolve and softened my granite heart. I had found a new life path into the open arms of a loving Savior eager to embrace even someone as vile as I.

There were no Christian friends to witness to me. There were no tracts to read, no revivals, no invitations of “just as I am.” It was just me, an old tattered Bible, and the Spirit. It’s important to understand that God alone is sufficient to draw men to him.

So it was on that day, under that conviction and all alone in that prison cell, that I fell to my knees and called out to God in faith and repentance. My prayer was something like this:

*Lord, I have been reading your Word. I believe you when you say, “Whosoever shall call upon your name shall be saved.” I want to simply take you at your own word, Lord, and ask you if you might forgive me all my black burden of sins and save me. If you would have me, Father, please save me right now. For I ask it in the name of your Son, Christ Jesus. Amen.*

I have to tell you that I did not hear any church bells ringing, angel choirs singing, or see the heavens open up. What I can tell you is that I *knew* down in the deepest recesses of my heart and soul for an absolute *fact* that God had heard my prayer of repentance and faith and answered with forgiveness and eternal salvation.

I rose up from that prison floor a “new creature in Christ Jesus” (2 Corinthians 5:17), every past sin forgiven, every future sin forgiven, washed white as snow by the blood of Christ (1 John 2:1–2), salvation sealed and guaranteed by the promise of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 1:22).

The Maniac was dead. Legion was evicted.

Peace flooded my soul for the first time in my life, quenching all the torment once and for all. Joy flowed through my body, the thought

of eternal salvation causing me to quiver. I paced that cell floor free from the bondage of sin, self, and Satan for the first time in my life. One act of obedient faith had changed my life and determined my eternity. Praise God. I was *free*!

Standing there in that cell with only the sound of my excited beating heart, a thought—literally out of the blue—suddenly struck me: Surely there were no *secret* Christians. How could you keep such a thing quiet? As my mind began to rationalize the experience, I know looking back that my new faith was immediately being tested. God was wasting no time in proving my salvation.

Satan was wasting no time either. He wanted me to doubt what had happened. He wanted me wonder if someone as bad as me could really be granted forgiveness. He tried to fill my mind with confusion. However, the spirit of God had already taken up residence, and the verses I had been reading quickly came to mind:

That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."  
Romans 10:9–13 (NKJV)

The truth was crystal clear to me: I needed to validate, testify, witness, and confess my salvation publicly. Jesus saved me, and if I truly believed that, my obligation was to proclaim it with my mouth. I knew my obligation to Christ was to openly confess Christ to both the inmates and the guards, whom I had, up to this moment, thoroughly detested. I had to boldly tell them that I had repented of my sin, wanted to completely turn away from my former wickedness, and that Jesus had saved me.

I knew that this single act of obedience is what would solidify my own confidence in my salvation experience. If I would not obey God's command to publicly proclaim my salvation, how could I privately be

sure of it? It had to be done and, as far as I was concerned, done immediately. It was *now* or never, and I knew it.

A few months earlier, I had relished the thought of battling fifteen prison guards. Now the thought of simply speaking to them about my conversion caused my knees to wobble in fear and self-doubt. If I went through with this public proclamation to both prisoners and guards, what would they think? How would respond? Would they think the prison system had broken me? Would the guards gloat in victory? Would the other inmates reject me?

The guards would probably think I was just trying to get out of solitary confinement. They might even think I had finally cracked mentally. I was sure there was no way they would ever accept my confession as genuine or that I would ever truly turn from my violent ways. It seemed an impossible situation! Thirty-two years of fearsome reputation was supposed to be discounted and forgotten with one statement of a “changed life”?

My flesh groaned, but I knew what had to be done, lest I prove that I was ashamed of my new Savior (Mark 8:38). Could I now play the coward for God when I was willing to give life, limb, and reputation for politics? Could I keep secret the salvation of Christ when I was willing previously to kill for the causes of man?

I talked to God about my fears, but again the heavens failed to open up for me. I didn’t need answers or confirmation from God, because his Word was crystal clear on the matter. I decided that I would use the 8:30 p.m. lockdown as the time to share my good news with the other blanket protestors. My heart pounded. How would they react?

When the inmates were finally secured and the night shift of guards had left, it seemed a great hush fell over the entire block in heavenly anticipation of my coming proclamation. It seems all the principalities of both heaven and hell waited to see what would unfold.

With my prison blanket wrapped around my shoulders, I slowly moved toward the steel door of my cell. I shouted out a call to meeting. “Right, men. Come to your doors. I have something important to tell you.”

With the usual murmurings and shuffling the loyalists all put ears to their doors to hear what I had to say. What they heard that evening in B-wing, H-block Six, Maze Prison was neither what they expected to hear, nor would it be forgotten any time soon.

My legs were shaking, my heart was thumping hard, and my flesh was protesting, but my new Christian spirit was bold and rejoicing that I was about to solidify my conversion with public confession. I opened my mouth, not sure of what I was going to say, but out it came:

“Men, today I have taken what is undoubtedly the most serious step in my life. I have renounced violence [audible gasps of astonishment and confusion]. I have asked God to forgive my murderous sins. I have put my trust in Christ Jesus as my Savior and asked God to save me, and I believe he has done so. From this day forth, I cease to be a military commander in the Ulster Freedom Fighters and wish only to be a mere volunteer in the army of the living Lord Jesus. From this day on, I will seek to serve him to the very best of my ability. I just wanted you men to know these things. That’s all.”

Stone-dead silence.

These men had seen me do many outrageous things, most of them violent. Four months ago, I had taken on fifteen guards and almost gave my life for it. They had seen me resist the prison system at all personal cost. They *knew* I would die before accepting the label of criminal. None of that prepared them for what I had just said. They were in complete and utter shock.

Years later, I was told that one loyalist named Hammy turned to Tonto and said, “What’s The Maniac up to now?” That skeptical prisoner is a Sunday school teacher today—a pillar of the Belfast community, having been saved for over twenty years.

Little did I know that this was to become the first of a *lifetime* of public testimonies concerning God’s grace and his gift of eternal salvation. It was the first night of my changed life, but life was to be anything but a bed of roses.

The difficulties were lining up, and the days ahead would prove my greatest challenge.

### **The Dawn of Hope**

Last night I tossed mid tortured dreams  
Upon a sweat-soaked bed.  
I dreamt of horrors from our past;  
And those that lie ahead.  
My heart ached sore for Ulster's plight;  
Our people maimed and torn.  
I saw the feral paths of men  
With flag-draped coffins borne.  
The widows wandered through my mind;  
I heard the orphans cry;  
Their little hearts clean broke in two  
As the sobbed, "Why, Mommy, why?"  
My troubled mind transported me  
To Belfast's ruined shell;  
Where written words, of mutual hate,  
On bomb-scared walls did tell  
Of inbred, tribal differences,  
For years steadfast maintained.  
A virtual, huge, Pandora's box  
Which Satan then unchained.  
We men were weak and far from God  
So Satan had his way.  
That's why we live in pain and grief  
The way we do today.  
There's just one power can end our plight;  
Command this strife to cease:  
It's Jesus Christ, the Son of God  
The Almighty Prince of peace!  
I waked amidst a bright new dawn,  
The Saviour took my hand  
And helped me pray that one day soon—  
We'll share a peace-filled land.

Cornelius Kenneth McClinton, 1979

## Article: “Former Terrorist Finds The Prince of Peace”

By David Kithcart, The 700 Club

CBN.com—Kenny McClinton was on the settee in his home, contemplating going to bed when someone with a 12-gauge shotgun came to his window. They sneaked into the garden, put the shotgun against the window and pulled the trigger directly at Kenny's head.

Two days after Christmas 1997, an assassin was sent on a mission. His objective: to kill Kenny McClinton. During Kenny's Loyalist terrorist days when he fought against the Irish Republican Army (IRA), an attack like this would have been expected as a part of everyday life; a life that was filled with violence.

The Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) is known as one of the most feared terrorist groups in the Western Hemisphere. They are organized, disciplined and have, in many cases, fought the IRA to a standstill. Kenny was a military commander with the UFF before he was sent to prison.

"I'm ashamed to say I was responsible for some of the most horrendous atrocities of that period. I didn't care whether I slaughtered men, women or children. I thought I was doing what was right. I'm utterly ashamed to say that in the next two-year period I personally took guns and shot two men dead."

Kenny was arrested for the two murders and sentenced to two life terms in prison, not to serve less than 20 years. He was sent to the



H block of Maze Prison reserved specifically for terrorists, where he once took on 15 prison guards all at the same time.

"I was nearly immediately made commanding officer of the paramilitary prisoners inside the prison. They had begun to call me 'that maniac, McClinton.'"

He was thrown into solitary confinement. His only cellmate was an old King James Bible. In it, Kenny found someone who offered him something he needed.

"I found a Savior who was willing to reach forth and touch lepers such as I, socially unacceptable, unclean indeed, a Savior, Jesus Christ, who had love in His heart even for murderers like me, and something began to melt within my hardened heart.

"I reached a stage that on the 12th of August, 1979, I could go no further. I fell to my knees on that cell floor and cried out to God. I cried out for forgiveness and repentance and faith given of God. I said, 'Lord, please come into my heart. Please forgive me for my black, murderous ends. Please, Lord, I beg of you.' And you know what? He did. Praise God, He did. I got up off that cell floor a new creature in Christ."

Kenny knew that he had to confess his newfound faith to his fellow inmates.

"I called the men to their cell doors that night. I said, 'I have something to tell you, men. I have taken the most serious step of my life. I have renounced violence. I have given my life to the Lord Jesus, and He has come into my heart and forgiven me my sins. For the rest of my life I want to serve Him to the best of my ability. From here on tonight, I cease to be the commanding officer of the UFF, the Ulster Freedom Fighters, but I wish only to be a mere volunteer in the army of the living Lord Jesus. I just wanted you men to know that.'

"Now there was complete shock that night in the H block. Silence. Suddenly my cell became a meetinghouse for other prisoners three times a week. It ended up that 24 notorious Loyalist prisoners, within an 18-month period, came to know Jesus as their Lord on my cell floor. Many prison officers were found kneeling on my floor, crying tears, but this time it wasn't in pain because 'The Maniac' had caught them in his lair. It was because I was on my knees beside them, leading them to the Lord Jesus Christ."

Kenny served a total of 16 years in prison. When he got out, he earned a bachelor's degree in criminology and studied the Bible. Kenny found that his life's experiences were drawing him back into associating with known terrorists. This time it was for a different purpose.

"Being an ex-prisoner myself and now born again by the power of the Lord, I have a unique ministry to prisoners and to their families. At the time, there was a prison riot with the LVF faction, the Loyalist Volunteer Force. I got permission from the secretary of state to visit the LIP, Billy Wright, who was the founder-leader of that group. I spoke with him for three hours. Because of the reasoning power the Lord gave me with Billy Wright, (whom I had led to the Lord in 1983 and who had then backslid), we were able to get the whole situation calmed down and a death threat from the LVF on prison officers was immediately lifted. Lives were saved, tensions were eased, and the prison tension and riot was solved."

Kenny claims that his success in negotiating an end to the riot made him the target of another Loyalist terrorist splinter group.

"Some people in the communist leadership of the UVF didn't like that. So an assassin came down to my window. My wife and I had just been at a Bible class where I had taught theology for two hours. I had been teaching that night on the concept of deliver us from evil from the Lord's Prayer. It was very much at the fore of my mind that the Lord was the only One that could deliver from evil. My wife, who was heavily pregnant with our little baby girl, Abigail, went up to bed because she was tired. I was going to follow her, when suddenly there was a blast in through the window, and the shotgun blast came through reinforced glass, in through the settee where Wendy had been sitting and into the wall. It was only by the grace of God that I survived and I was left with lead on my collar. If Wendy had been sitting there, she would now have been dead; our little baby girl, Abigail, would not have survived such a shotgun blast. It was 12-gauge."

Kenny continues to negotiate in what can sometimes be a political minefield. One casualty was Kenny's former protégé, Billy Wright. Known in the media as "King Rat," Wright was killed in prison under suspicious circumstances.

"Twenty thousand people attended this man's funeral, and that 20,000 people walked all the way from his home to the graveyard, and there I was given the God-given opportunity to preach the Gospel. I had led Billy Wright to the Lord in 1983, but Billy had allowed his loyalties, divided loyalties, between his love for his country and his love for his Savior to come between him and Christ, and he had taken up again the fight against the IRA. But for every conversation I had had with Billy Wright over a number of years since that, the one thing that encouraged me was that Billy Wright never had any peace; he would forthrightly tell anyone that would listen that he had walked away from the greatest friend and the most sincere love that he had ever known in Christ Jesus, and missed the close fellowship that he had had with his Savior."

It's not difficult for Kenny to remember the same overwhelming conviction he had once held for his own beliefs, beliefs for which he had been willing to murder.

"I was dedicated to what I believed, but the difficulty with being sincere and sincerely committed is that one can be sincerely wrong, and I was sincerely wrong, and there was only the Lord Jesus Christ that could change me from being such a dedicated terrorist."

Kenny has been marginally involved in the Northern Ireland peace accords. He was able to convince the LVF to show good faith in the peace process by being the first terrorist organization to voluntarily decommission some of their weapons.

"As the angle grinders bit into the submachine guns, it was as if the Sword of the Spirit was biting into terrorism here in Ulster, that hearts were being encouraged with new hope, that we did not need to slay and slaughter each other with weapons to get our points of view across, that honest reason and debate and the will of the people could be fulfilled.

"Yes, it was a wonderful day."

Kenny is looking forward to many more warm, wonderful days for his country and with his family.

"Having lived at that cruel, fierce and that sub-human side of terrorism myself, and having taken precious life myself, and as a murderer, (and I will be a murderer until the day I die), I now need to put something back into the community that's positive. If I can bring

some people away from taking life and if I can take the instruments of death off the streets, then surely it's going some way to keeping someone from falling into the same situation that I was in, in 1977, and to stop the heartache and the tears and the misery that my victims' families went through. So it's my contribution to peace, because of the inspiration of the Prince of Peace himself, Christ Jesus."

# Appendix: Northern Ireland



Area: 14,120 sq. km.

## **Population**

Population (1993): 1,631,800.

Northern Ireland is the second most sparsely populated part of the UK after Scotland, with 317 people per square mile (122 per square kilometer).

Ulster's population is much younger than the national average, with particularly large differences in the 5–15, 45–65, and over 80 age ranges. There are no significant ethnic minorities (e.g., black, Asian, or Chinese).

## **Education**

Participation in further and higher education is high—79 percent of youngsters continue their schooling past the age of 16—and examination attainment levels are good.

Around 30 percent of Northern Ireland's pupils who stayed on at school after the age of sixteen gained two or more A levels, the highest level in the UK.

Education historically tends to have been split on a sectarian basis, but there are increasing attempts to integrate schools.

## **Economy**

Due to Ulster's historic problems, investment levels have been poor. This has led to the highest levels of unemployment in the UK and the lowest figures for gross domestic product figure in the UK (81.6, compared with a UK average of 100).

Northern Ireland has a very different class distribution to the UK, with a larger number in unskilled and skilled manual occupations.

Since the beginning of 1997, however, millions of pounds have been invested in Northern Ireland's economy by companies convinced the peace process will work.

Outside Belfast and Londonderry, Ulster is predominantly rural and has a strong agricultural economy, with dairy products and beef both important.

Belfast and Dublin are connected by a good rail line, and trains also connect Ulster's capital with Londonderry and the ferry port of Larne, which links with Stranraer in Scotland.

The main M1 motorway runs west from Belfast as far as Dungannon, and there are dual carriageway trunk roads to Londonderry and the Irish border.

## **The Two Communities**

Protestants outnumber Catholics in Ulster, although there has been significant intermarriage. In the 1991 census, 38.4 percent of the population regarded themselves as Catholic, 50.6 percent as Protestant, while 3.8 percent professed no religion, and 7.3 percent refused to say.

Catholics are in the majority in some parts of Ulster—Derry City, County Fermanagh, County Armagh, and parts of Belfast—while making up less than 10 percent of the population in other areas: Larne and the County Antrim coast, Bangor and North Down, East Belfast.

Protestants are overwhelmingly Presbyterian and have religious, cultural, and familial links with Scotland.

An important part of the unionist community's culture is the Orange Lodges being a meeting place for ordinary Protestant men. The nationalist community is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. In recent years, there has been an increase in tit-for-tat church and lodge burnings.

Source: [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/events/northern\\_ireland/focus/77085.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/events/northern_ireland/focus/77085.stm)

## **Key Events in Northern Ireland History**

Ireland has been divided administratively since 1922 when the Irish Free State was formed.

### **Twelfth Century**

First involvement by England in Irish affairs when the Earl of Pembroke, known as Strongbow, intervened in a local dispute in Leinster in 1170. King Henry II landed the following year.

English expansion continued, and in 1177, Ulster was conquered by soldiers led by John de Courcy.

### **Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century**

English expansion halted and then reversed. By the end of the period, English possessions were limited to a small area around Dublin, the

“Pale.” Everything outside was regarded as savage, giving rise to the expression “beyond the Pale.”

### **Sixteenth Century**

First Henry VIII and then Elizabeth I took an increasing interest in Ireland. Colonization increased again, sparking off several rebellions late in the century.

The greatest of the revolts, led by Ulsterman Hugh O'Neill, the Earl of Tyrone, reached its high point with victory over the English at the Yellow Ford in 1598, but he was defeated three years later at Kinsale and surrendered.

### **Seventeenth Century**

Start of the “Plantation of Ulster”—the systematic colonization of Donegal, Tyrone, Derry, Armagh, Cavan, and Fermanagh by settlers from England and Scotland.

After Parliament's victory in the English Civil War, Oliver Cromwell conquered the whole of Ireland and set about opening the island up to colonization.

### **1690**

Protestant King William of Orange's troops defeated the Catholic army of King James at the Battle of the Boyne to confirm his claim to the English throne—and with it, Ireland.

By the end of the seventeenth century, Ulster, in particular, was heavily settled mainly by Scottish Presbyterians.

### **1912**

Amid a growing home rule campaign, the Ulster unionist leader, Sir Edward Carson, set up the original Ulster Volunteer Force as a bulwark against Dublin's domination of the Protestant majority “six counties” in the north part of Ireland. Carson is still regarded by many as the founder of the state of Northern Ireland.

### **1916**

The Easter Rising. Pro-home rule Irish rebels seize the post office building in the centre of Dublin but are eventually ousted by British soldiers. Fifteen of the rebellion's leaders are executed. Carson's UVF,



which had become a division of the British army, fought in France, and a thousand died at the Somme.

## **1921-22**

The first Northern Ireland Parliament opened.

After a long and bitter guerrilla campaign against the British army, Ireland was granted partial home rule.

Michael Collins, founder of the Irish Free State, is a major political figure.

The Irish Free State was set up in the southern twenty-six counties of Ireland. Its architect, Michael Collins, was assassinated during the ensuing civil war between his Free State forces and the IRA, which refused to accept the partition.

The war ended after the new Irish government executed IRA leaders.

## **1939-45**

The Irish Republic remained neutral in World War II, while Northern Ireland became an important allied sea and air base.

## **1949**

Ireland became a full republic, and the British government gave new constitutional guarantees to the Northern Ireland Parliament at Stormont.

## **1952**

The official IRA called off a series of attacks on Royal Ulster Constabulary Police stations near the Irish border, which caused few casualties and generated little publicity.

## **1956**

The IRA launched a border campaign, which led to the introduction of internment of suspects without trial both in the republic and in Northern Ireland.

## **1968**

The civil rights movement began the campaign for equal rights in housing and voting for poorer Catholics. Protestants counter-demonstrated.

## 1969

March: The RUC was armed in border areas for the first time since 1965.

August: The province's Catholic minority welcomed British troops sent to Northern Ireland in response to an upsurge in sectarian violence. The provisional IRA (the "Provos") broke away from the official IRA, which was criticized for failing to protect Catholic enclaves.

## 1970

August: The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) was formed to press for Catholic civil rights. By then the British army was seen as an army of occupation by many Catholics, and several soldiers were shot dead by the IRA.

October: The former Irish Finance Minister Charles Haughey was found not guilty of illegally importing arms. It was alleged he planned to send the weapons across the border to arm nationalists. Mr. Haughey, later to become prime minister of the republic, became a hate figure for unionists in Northern Ireland.

## 1971

February: First soldier shot dead in Northern Ireland since troops arrived in August 1969.

August: Internment without trial was introduced. Hundreds of suspected extremists—including the present Sinn Féin President, Gerry Adams—were rounded up and detained over the next four years.

December: Fifteen people were killed in an attack on a Belfast pub. The Ulster Volunteer Force claimed responsibility.

## 1972

January, "Bloody Sunday": Thirteen Catholic protesters died after being shot by troops from the First Battalion of the Parachute Regiment following disturbances during a banned civil rights march in Londonderry.

March: Edward Heath's conservative government imposed direct rule on the province, creating the post of Northern Ireland secretary, and

closed the unionist-dominated Stormont Parliament in a concession to Republicans. The Ulster Unionist Party broke off formal links with the Conservative Party in protest.

The IRA declared a temporary cease-fire, and several Republican leaders, including Gerry Adams, were flown to London for secret talks with the government, which came to nothing.

July: Nine people were killed when twenty-two bombs exploded in Belfast. This became known as "Bloody Friday." The IRA was held responsible.

## **1974**

January: The government set up a power-sharing executive in which posts are handed out on a quota basis in a bid to include Catholics in the decision-making process and end the much-resented unionist domination.

May: In Dublin, twenty-two people were killed by car bombs that exploded without warning. Five people were killed by a car bomb in Monaghan Town. Three more people died later from their injuries. Loyalist paramilitaries were thought to have carried out the attacks, although the UDA and the UVF denied they were involved.

Protestant workers all over Northern Ireland went on strike in protest at the power-sharing executive plus a proposed council of all Ireland. It promptly resigned, and direct rule was re-imposed.

October: Five people were killed as an IRA bomb wrecked a pub in Guildford, Surrey, frequented by soldiers. The IRA attacked another pub also used by soldiers in Woolwich, southeast London.

November: Twenty-one people were killed by two IRA bombs planted in two pubs in Birmingham.

## **1975**

October: In a series of UVF attacks, twelve people were killed and forty-six people were injured. The UVF was declared an illegal organization.

November: A gang of loyalists, known as the Shankill Butchers, abducted and murdered a Catholic reveler as he walked home through West Belfast.

December: Internment was lifted by the new Northern Ireland Secretary of Labor, Merlyn Rees.

### **1977**

May: The second Ulster (Protestant) workers' strike petered out.

### **1978**

February: Twelve people were killed and twenty-three were injured in an IRA bomb attack on a hotel in County Down.

### **1979**

Charles Haughey was elected Taoiseach of the republic (prime minister).

Eleven members of the so-called "Shankill Butchers" were given life sentences by a Belfast court for a series of sectarian murders.

March: Airey Neave, conservative MP and shadow Northern Ireland secretary, was killed by a bomb attached to his car in the House of Commons car park by the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), the military wing of the Irish Republican Socialist Party—an IRA splinter group.

Lord Mountbatten was killed by the IRA.

August: Lord Mountbatten, last viceroy of India and uncle of the Prince of Wales, was killed by an IRA bomb on his boat off the coast of County Donegal in the Irish Republic.

On the same day, an IRA bomb exploded under an army bus at Warrenpoint, County Down. A second bomb went off as the survivors clambered out of the bus and onto an army helicopter.

Eighteen soldiers and one civilian died. It was the army's biggest single setback since the IRA campaign began.

### **1981**

May: Bobby Sands died in the Maze Prison after a prolonged hunger strike. He was the first of ten IRA and INLA prisoners to starve to death. They were protesting in vain for the right to be considered prisoners of war rather than criminals.

## **1984**

October: Five people were killed and thirty were injured when an IRA bomb exploded at the Grand Hotel in Brighton during the Conservative Party conference. Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher narrowly escaped death, and the party chairman, Norman Tebbit, was seriously injured.

## **1985**

November: The Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed by Ms. Thatcher, and the Irish Taoiseach, Garret FitzGerald, set up a number of cross-border initiatives. It was opposed by many Ulster unionists. Thousands turned out in Belfast to cheer Reverend Ian Paisley's famous "No Surrender" speech against the agreement.

## **1987**

November: Eleven were killed by an IRA bomb that exploded during a remembrance service in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh.

## **1988**

March: Three IRA members were shot dead by British Special Forces in Gibraltar, where they were allegedly planning an attack on the British garrison.

Nine days later, during their funeral, a lone loyalist gunman, Michael Stone, killed three mourners in a gun and grenade attack on the Milltown Cemetery in West Belfast.

Four days later, two soldiers in civilian clothes drove into the funeral cortege of one of the IRA men killed by Stone and were abducted, beaten, stripped, and shot dead.

## **1989**

September: Eleven army bandsmen were killed when a bomb exploded at the Royal Marines' School of Music in Deal, Kent.

## **1990**

July: Conservative MP Ian Gow, a strong supporter of the unionist cause, was murdered by an IRA bomb at his Sussex home.

## **1992**

April: An IRA bomb outside the Baltic Exchange building in the City of London killed three.

## **1993**

March: Two children, ages three and twelve, were killed by an IRA bomb planted in a rubbish bin in the center of Warrington, Cheshire.

October: Loyalist gunmen stormed into the Rising Sun bar in Greysteel, County Londonderry, shouting, "Trick or treat," and opening fire on drinkers, killing six men and two women.

## **1994**

July: Several people, including a man in his eighties, were shot by loyalist gunmen as they watched the Ireland versus Italy World Cup match on television in a pub in the predominantly Catholic village of Loughinisland, County Down.

August: IRA announced a complete cessation of violence.

October: Cessation of loyalist hostilities was announced by the Combined Loyalist Military Command.

## **1995**

December: President Clinton visited Northern Ireland and shook hands with Gerry Adams.

## **1996**

February: The IRA called off its cease-fire and, one hour later, set off a bomb at South Quay near Canary Wharf in London's Docklands, which killed two, injured one hundred, and caused millions of pounds' worth of damage.

The Docklands bomb brought to an end the first IRA cease-fire.

A few days later, another bomb exploded prematurely on a bus in Aldwych, central London, killing eight people, including the bomber.

June: A huge IRA bomb destroyed Manchester's Arndale Centre, but no one was killed.

July: A march by Orangemen was blocked by the RUC at Drumcree, near Portadown, as it approached the Catholic Garvaghy Road area. After a standoff, the RUC made a U-turn and permitted the march,

sparking violent clashes between Catholics and the police in Portadown, Belfast, and Londonderry.

A few days later, forty people were injured by a bomb at the Killyhevlin Hotel in Enniskillen. Responsibility was claimed by the extremist Republican Continuity Army Council.

August: Northern Ireland Secretary Sir Patrick Mayhew banned loyalist Apprentice Boys from marching along contentious sections of Londonderry's city walls for the traditional Siege of Derry celebration. Loyalist leaders pulled back from a confrontation with security forces.

October: An IRA bomb exploded at the Thiepval Barracks in Lisburn, killing a British soldier.

## **1997**

February: Corporal Stephen Restorick was shot dead by an IRA sniper at a checkpoint in south Armagh.

April: IRA bomb hoaxers caused havoc on Britain's motorways, especially the M6 in Birmingham and the M1 in Northamptonshire.

July: The IRA declared another cease-fire. UUP leader David Trimble met Tony Blair on Downing Street. At a news conference afterward, Mr. Trimble announced that the unionists were unhappy with the talk proposals and would not support the government on the decommissioning vote. Ian Paisley met Tony Blair and claimed the talk process was "dead in the water." First Sinn Fein government meeting since the restoration of the IRA cease-fire.

August: Gerry Adams and Mo Mowlam (Northern Ireland secretary) met at Stormont for the first time since the cease-fire. Mo Mowlam announced that Sinn Fein would be admitted to the peace talks.

September: Sinn Fein affirmed its commitment to the Mitchell principles of democracy and nonviolence, but the unionists remained unconvinced. These guidelines are named after former American Senator George Mitchell, who chaired the political talks process. The six principles included the total disarmament of all paramilitary organizations and the end of the so-called punishment killings and beatings.

The deadlock was broken as the parties concerned struck a deal, opening the way to peace talks.

October: For the first time in twenty-five years, unionists, loyalists, nationalists, and Republicans sat together to seek a solution to Ulster's problems. Tony Blair shook hands with Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams. He became the first British prime minister for seventy years to meet a Sinn Fein delegation. Unionists reacted angrily.

The Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) withdrew from the Combined Loyalist Military Command, the umbrella group for loyalist paramilitary groups.

Northern Ireland Secretary Mo Mowlam gave wider powers to the Northern Ireland Parades Commission. The intention was to halt or reroute flashpoint marches. Nationalist resident groups called for the disbandment of the commission.

December: Gerry Adams and Sinn Fein delegation met Prime Minister Tony Blair at Number 10 Downing Street. He is the first Irish Republican leader to visit Downing Street since Michael Collins visited Lloyd George in 1921.

Londonderry experienced its worst violence since the restoration of the IRA cease-fire in July when riots broke out as nationalists protested at a Protestant Apprentice Boys parade through the city centre.

The Northern Ireland secretary ordered a full inquiry into how a Republican prisoner managed to escape from the high-security Maze Prison, despite the recent tightening of security.

Billy Wright, one of Ulster's most feared loyalist paramilitaries, was shot dead at the top-security Maze Prison in Northern Ireland. His loyalist volunteer force carried out a series of revenge shootings—one within twenty-four hours and another on New Year's Eve.

## **1998**

January: The peace process was in danger of collapsing as loyalist prisoners in the Maze withdrew their support for the talks.

Mo Mowlam gambled on a historic face-to-face meeting with the prisoners inside the Maze. It worked, and the loyalist inmates announced renewed support for the peace process. Two days later, another Catholic was murdered by LVF gunmen. The victim, Terry Enwright, was married to a niece of Gerry Adams.



After a period of violence in which a total of seven Catholics and two Protestants died, the loyalist Ulster Democratic Party left the peace talks when one of the groups to which it was linked, the Ulster Freedom Fighters, admitted some of the killings.

February: Two men were killed, and the IRA was blamed by RUC Chief Constable Ronnie Flanagan. As a result, Sinn Fein was suspended from the peace talks until March 9, despite arguing that it did not represent the IRA. Sinn Fein said it might not return to the table and insisted on a meeting with Tony Blair.

The UDP was readmitted to the talks after its suspension was lifted.

Source: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special\\_report/1998/northern\\_ireland/10657.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special_report/1998/northern_ireland/10657.stm)

## **Northern Ireland Political Parties**

### **Alliance Party**

Founded in 1970, the Alliance Party is nonsectarian and broadly liberal. It wants a strong Northern Ireland Assembly with a high degree of devolved powers on the lines of the Scottish Parliament.

It has no MPs but six members of the Northern Ireland Assembly and is led by Sean Neeson.

### **Democratic Unionist Party**

The DUP was founded in 1971 by Reverend Ian Paisley and William Boal, an MP who defected from the official unionists in protest of the policies of then Prime Minister Terence O'Neill. Mr. Paisley had previously been the leader of the Protestant Unionist Party.

It currently has two MPs, party leader Mr. Paisley and Peter Robinson, after gaining 14 percent of the province's vote at the 1997 general election. Another prominent member of the party is Ian Paisley Jr.

The DUP won twenty seats in the first elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The DUP is more vociferous than the UUP in its defense of the union and regards any concessions to nationalists or the republic as treachery. It is also strongly anti-Catholic in the religious sense, with Mr. Paisley denouncing the pope regularly.

It is opposed to the Good Friday Agreement.

### **Northern Ireland Women's Coalition**

A nonsectarian party dedicated to a stable settlement and to promoting the role of women in Northern Ireland. It has no MPs but won two seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

### **Progressive Unionist Party**

The PUP is linked to the Ulster Volunteer Force, a banned paramilitary group.

As well as wanting the early release of UVF prisoners, the PUP dislikes what it sees as too many concessions to Republicans during the peace process. However, it supports the Good Friday Agreement.

Its leader is David Ervine. It has two representatives in the Northern Ireland Assembly but no MPs.

### **Sinn Fein**

Sinn Fein is a Republican party devoted to establishing a united Ireland. It, therefore, advocates strong cross-border bodies and the maintenance of the republic's territorial claim to Northern Ireland, though it backs the Good Friday deal.

The current form of the party dates back to 1970 when provisional Sinn Fein split off from official Sinn Fein, which became the Workers' Party. This split mirrored the split in the IRA into official and provisional wings.

Unionists say that Sinn Fein and the IRA are strongly linked, but the party denies this and was angry when suspended from the peace talks in February after the IRA was blamed for two murders by the RUC.

Its two MPs are party president Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness. At the 1997 general election, it won 16 percent of the vote.

Sinn Fein won eighteen seats at the Northern Ireland Assembly.

### **Social Democratic and Labor Party**

The SDLP is the largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland. It won 24 percent of the vote in the 1997 general election and has three MPs, including party leader John Hume.

Mr. Hume was instrumental in getting the peace process underway by holding talks with Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams and with the British government.

The SDLP won twenty-four seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly, making it the second largest party. Mr. Hume declined to become deputy first minister, allowing his own number two, Seamus Mallon, to take up that post.

The party is left of center and favors strong cross-border bodies. It supports the Good Friday deal.

### **Ulster Democratic Party**

The UDP has strong links with the banned loyalist paramilitary group, the Ulster Freedom Fighters. One of its central policies is the release of UFF prisoners.

The UDP left the peace talks in January 1998 after the UFF admitted taking part in the killing of three Catholics. If it had not left, it would have been suspended, as parties are not allowed in the talks if groups to which they are linked take part in violence. The UDP was re-admitted in February and signed up to the deal.

The UDP leader is Gary McMichael. It has no MPs and, to the surprise of many, failed to win any Northern Ireland Assembly seats.

### **Ulster Unionist Party**

The UUP is the largest unionist party in Northern Ireland, with ten MPs. Its leader is David Trimble, who took over for James Molyneux in 1995. At the 1997 general election, it won 33 percent of the popular vote.

It took twenty-eight seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly, making Mr. Trimble the first minister.

The UUP was formerly the Official Unionist Party, and as such, it formed the government of Northern Ireland from 1921 until 1972 when direct rule from London was imposed.

The central plank of UUP policy is maintaining the link between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. It is willing to tolerate north-south bodies as long as they have no executive powers.

Mr. Trimble was instrumental in signing the Good Friday deal, but many members of his party, including some MPs, remain opposed.

### **United Kingdom Unionist Party**

The UKUP was set up in 1995 by its sole MP, Bob McCartney, a former member of the UUP.

And although the party won five seats in the assembly, one held by Mr. McCartney, his four colleagues have left to set up a new party, which they hope to call the Northern Ireland Unionist Party.

The breakaway group has promised to remain hostile to the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr. McCartney supports the link with the UK and opposes any moves to involve the Irish Republic in Northern Ireland's affairs. His central premise is that Northern Ireland should become more British and remain part of the UK simply because the majority of its citizens want it that way.

The UKUP is opposed to the Good Friday Agreement.

### **The Workers' Party**

A Republican socialist party formerly known as Sinn Féin, the Workers' Party changed its name in 1982 in a bid to remove all associations with traditional Irish Republicanism.

Operating on both sides of the border, it had six members of the Irish Parliament in 1992, but they left to form a new party, the Democratic left.

Its aim is to establish a socialist, unitary state in Ireland.

Source: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/events/northern\\_ireland/parties/70610.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/events/northern_ireland/parties/70610.stm)



# Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The Antrim-Plateau is a mountainous line stretching down the east side of Northern Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> Ulster, the common name for Northern Ireland, was originally one of the four provinces of Ireland. At that time, Ulster had nine counties, but now the state of Ulster has only six counties: Antrim, Down, Londonderry, Armagh, Fermanagh, and Tyrone. Three of the counties of the original Ulster Province voted in 1920 to become part of the Republic of Ireland (Eire), while the six counties of Ulster voted to remain as an integral part of the sovereign territory of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom (UK). For a map and the geography of Ireland, see the appendix at the end of this book.

<sup>3</sup> Belfast Prison, now closed, was built at a time of famine in Ireland. There are many tales of sadness and terror that surround the prison and hide inside its gray walls. It has housed hundreds of political prisoners and was home to many daring escapes from 1970–80.

<sup>4</sup> The pledge was a personal oath, typically done in God's name, carrying with it a degree of seriousness and commitment. It would analogous in the west to us declaring, "I promise—with God as my witness—I vow to..."

<sup>5</sup> A family dwelling awarded by the government social services.

<sup>6</sup> David, king of Israel, had a special love for Jonathan, who was Saul's son. Saul was the first king of Israel. "Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:3, NKJV).

<sup>7</sup> A Nissen hut was a prefabricated, corrugated tin structure commonly used by the military that could be quickly and cheaply assembled.

<sup>8</sup> A pound is typically equal to about two (2) US dollars.

<sup>9</sup> Motorized cargo-hauling vehicle.

The Bastille was a prison in France that the kings and queens often used to lock up the people that did not agree with their decisions. To many, it was a symbol of all the bad things done by the kings and queens.

<sup>11</sup> An infectious bacterial disease transmitted through the air that causes degeneration of the lungs; while it is curable now, it was historically fatal.

<sup>12</sup> Inflammation of the inner lining of the chest wall, often resulting in chest pain worse on coughing and deep breathing.

<sup>13</sup> A rampart built around the top of a castle with regular gaps for firing arrows or guns.

<sup>14</sup> Not her real name.

<sup>15</sup> Not her real name.

<sup>16</sup> An organization similar to the Boy Scouts.

<sup>17</sup> Dancer; jiving was a form of dancing at that time.

<sup>18</sup> Cricket is a baseball-like game with the bat being much the same size and weight as in the American game.

<sup>19</sup> A short, thick post that boats can be tied to.

<sup>20</sup> A petty officer on a merchant ship who controls the work of other seamen; a contraction of boatswain.

<sup>21</sup> A wharf usually built parallel to the shoreline.

<sup>22</sup> A ramp from the shore or pier to the ship.

<sup>23</sup> The captain's decline to report stamp noting bad conduct of a sailor.

<sup>24</sup> The Orange Order was an organization created just before 1800 with the goal of uniting Protestant groups together to deal with perceived aggression from the Roman Catholics of Ireland.

<sup>25</sup> At that time, the native popular were ancient Britons or Cruthins.

<sup>26</sup> Read these excellent books: *The Ulster Identity* by Ian Adamson and *Ulster's Hidden Identity* by Michael Hall.

<sup>27</sup> The great potato famine of Ireland occurred from 1846–50 and resulted in the deaths of as many as one million Irish; the poor were particularly hit hard, and many see this as the start of the Troubles in that country.

<sup>28</sup> The idea of a sovereign and separate Irish country without the presence of British rule.

<sup>29</sup> The best American analogy I can give is this: Texas was previously part of Mexico. But instead of the entire state seceding from Mexico, the panhandle of Texas decided, for their own reasons, to remain part of Mexico. The main part of Texas, however, wasn't in the mood to have any Mexicans *anywhere* in Texas. So the "mainland" Texans would do anything possible to force the panhandle of Texas to be "free" from Mexico, even if the panhandlers still wanted to be a part of Mexico. The panhandlers decide to have a separate country of their own still associated with Mexico. The rest of Texas decides that they will force their wishes on the panhandle regardless. This gives you a picture of what was going on politically in Ireland.

<sup>30</sup> A type of law enforcement officer.