

It's good of you to give me a hand; a lot of folks just walk on past an old timer like me. And thanks for taking my bag, feels like I've been carrying it for years. Now let me catch my breath; I'll tell you a story for the road. Fair exchange is no robbery, isn't that the old saying?

It was boxing night in Belfast, 1977; broken bottles caught the street lights and crunched under our feet. We left the main road behind us, cut through side streets and alleys; moving like a nasty fix through a sick and corrupted body. We were headed for the Battle Lands. It was a maze of unlit, derelict streets between Prod and Catholic, a no man's land where we'd taken over a ruined house and made it our own. And a place we'd been warned to keep away from.

Warnings fall like melting snow on the heads of the young.

I heard Jake stop a few feet behind me, so I did too. Decky and Blondie carried on, his leather jacket draped hugely over her shoulders, arm round her, like he owned her. I turned to Jake. The plastic bag crushed as he inhaled the solvent thick air and then it slowly re-inflated, obscuring his face like a dirty yellow balloon. He swayed, and then staggered into me, the glue bag pressed against my cheek like a bloated, lifeless insect. I grabbed him by the lapels of his denim jacket, the bag started to float away. His stoned pupils followed it languorously, and he tried to go after it.

'Leave it,' I said, 'it's dead.'

Jake started to laugh, 'RIP the bag,' he said, blessing himself, getting it wrong.

I let go, watched him waver, then steady. I turned, followed the lovers, and tried not to look to at the empty houses. I could feel their dead eyes watching me, the trespasser, and I shivered. We should not have come back here.

A bit further on I saw them in the gloom, arms wrapped round each other like slow dancers at a disco, their faces stuck together. Blondie had been my girl at one time. She'd seen all of us, you know what it was like, but by then it was Decky's turn. And Decky fell for her. I would say that Blondie was his first, not that Blondie really cared.

'Oi!' I shouted, top of my lungs. Decky flinched, Blondie screeched, satisfying. She turned from him and started raining the digs into me, swearing like a trooper. Blondie McBride was only a wee thing, but she could pack a fair punch. She was something else all right. I stood my ground as her punches softened, becoming gentle slaps and then I felt her thin arms, cold as a corpse, laced round my ribs.

'I'm freezing,' she said. Then she pushed her warm lips to mine, her breath coating my chin. I didn't stop her. No sooner had our lips had touched, and Blondie's mouth was jerked back, pulling away from me. It was Decky. More swearing and half hearted punches from her, this time directed at him, now looking at me, face like thunder. I forced a cold smile, kept it fixed, even when Blondie started to go to work on his mouth. Jake stumbled into me. Only then did I look away.

'What's the craic?' he asked.

'Nothing, waiting for you,' I said. We were across the road from the empty house we had made our own. Decky and Blondie had stopped snogging, and we stood silently. No one moved.

Decky spoke first.

'Come on we'll get out of here,' he said. Then he added, 'She's cold, she'll catch her death.' Decky was smart, smarter than me. Brave too. Blondie was smiling over at me, lids half closed, ringed with dark mascara, sexy as hell. I didn't speak, forcing more from him.

'We were told,' Decky said quietly.

'Wha?' I said sounding confused, but I knew what he meant. The I.R.A had warned us to keep out of the Battle Lands. One of them had stuck a dirty big gun in my mouth to help us understand. The flat look in the eyes of the guy who'd done it said that killing me would be no big deal. Still, in the empty Battle Lands street, I laughed in Decky's face, said he'd no bottle. The silence returned and I thought he was going to back down; he always backed down, but not that day. A man can only take so much, everyone has their limit.

'You looked pretty scared to me last week when you sucked on that gun.' I stepped to him, hungry to hurt him, was about to stick the head in when Jake spoke up.

'Sure the boys are on Christmas ceasefire. Relax,' he said. 'I'll make us a wee fire, no worries, no hurries.' Blondie shrugged away from Decky, called Jake a sweetheart. She linked him and they crossed the street, aiming for the house. Decky and me followed, space between us, nothing more said. Blondie and Jake had stopped at the small garden wall.

Decky pointed and said, 'Look,' though we all were. Someone had jammed a thick plank of wood across the front door of the club house and nailed it in place.

'Who cares?' I replied, mostly because it was him, also because of her. 'That's not our way in anyway.' I hoisted myself up on the broken ground floor window ledge, and used the drain pipe to reach the first floor window, led the way, and the others followed. Before long Jake had made good on his promise of the fire, and the four of us sat on the old mattress, watching the flames first rage, then quieten down in the blackened hearth, until the burning wood was reduced to glowing white bones. I was sitting at one end, Blondie to my left, sleeping. I could feel the soft push of her hips against me as she lay on Decky.

'Fire's going out,' I said, knowing Decky was probably dozing too, hoping Jake would go.

There was a pile of scrap wood, broken chair legs and splintered floor boards, in the pantry. When we first claimed the house I had gone in there and heaved a door that was on its side out of the way. A fat brown rat had darted out, bounded over my shoes; it could have gone straight up my trouser leg, if it had wanted to. The rat stopped and looked at me, black eyes twinkling. Its yellow teeth protruded like two chips of stained enamel. Then it was gone; out the back door in a flash of oily fur, its tail whipping. I was still holding the up the old door. Under it, somehow worst of all, was a child's doll; its stuffing ruined, black glassy eyes staring up from a rosy face.

I helped salvage fire wood from the surrounding streets but had never set foot in that pantry again.

I felt the mattress move as Jake got up with a sigh and then made his way slowly into the pantry. The off key xylophone sound of wood being disturbed, followed by clanks and cracks as he dropped his selected cuts on the floor. Blondie stirred beside me at the noise, as I watched a dying flame flicker and then resurge in the ashes.

I became aware of silence from the pantry. How long had passed while I was dreaming into the fire? I listened, for more sounds of Jake at work, but there was nothing.

‘Jake?’ I said. No reply. Seconds ticked by.

‘Do you need a hand?’ I said, louder this time, but I didn’t get up. I heard Decky clear his throat beside me, Blondie shifted her warmth, moving closer to him.

The fire was out, a dull glow all that remained.

I got up, almost unbalanced, the remains of the glue still rustling in my brain. With one hand on the broken plaster of the mantle, I turned to see Jake slowly emerge from the blackness of the pantry. He was staring down at something in his hand, and for a second, I was sure he was cradling a rat. I took a step back, squinting at him as he raised and pointed the black thing in my direction.

‘No,’ I said, ‘don’t.’

‘Look what I found,’ laughed Jake. It was a handgun, with a long barrel. Its black snout was still trained on me and all I could do was watch it.

'There's other stuff too, in the wood pile.' Decky and Blondie bounced to their feet, pushed past me and Jake who was still staring at the gun. They charged into the pantry. Whoops and exclamations, laughing.

Blondie's voice, echoing from the room beyond: 'Jesus Christ, Decky, Jesus Christ, look at this!' I took first one, then another step towards Jake, watched his thick thumb try to cock and then slip off the firing pin. I reached out, heart pounding, carefully pushed his forearm lower until the gun was pointing into the mattress on the floor. I could hear more swearing and excited laughs from the kitchen. I took a shaking breath, and voiced the only kind of sound thinking most young men can manage: Too little too late.

'We need to get out of here right now,' I said.

Jake slowly looked up from the gun, excitement bleeding from his face with the colour. His mouth started to tremble, his eyes dancing horrifically in the dying light.

'I can't let go of this,' he said, voice trembling.

'What?' I replied. Before he had a chance to speak, the screaming started.

Decky ran in from the black maw of the pantry, his hands on his head, tearing his face off, skin coming in black treacle like strips off his head, then returning and settling to the form of his skull. Circles of white round his eyes and mouth were visible, an obscene minstrel, like the ones they used to show dancing and singing on TV. Blondie staggered after him, shrieking a cocktail of convent blessings and foul blasphemies, swinging her arms from side to side, rocking

something that looked like a dead stick baby. Decky was closer, so I went to him, took him by the shoulders and as he continued to tear at his face. Close enough to have a proper look.

It was a balaclava, the sort of woolly mask the I.R.A and all the rest wore.

'Oh Jesus,' I said. The gun, the mask: The house was being used for an arm's dump. That was why we had been warned off. Decky's eyes gleamed frantically from behind the mask, a child with his head caught between the spindles of a banister.

'Get it off me, get it off me!' he kept saying. I yanked and he screamed, wet warmth coating my finger tips. I looked down and saw the problem. The fabric of the woolen mask was embedded; it was *stitched* into Decky's neck in thick interloping braids. I know that sounds impossible, but that is the God's truth. I wish I could forget it, but I can still see it now, clean as a newly developed photograph.

I pulled again and saw his flesh tug and rip, more blood leaked from the line of stitching that had torn his skin. The wool felt as strong as spun steel, the mask would de-glove his whole face before tearing loose. I let go, with Decky still screeching, each cry more panicked and pained than the last as he tore at the mask. I wiped the blood from my hands on my jumper, vaguely aware I had started to cry.

I turned to Blondie.

She was still swinging her stick baby, bashing it against the wall now, sending mouldy plaster and bits of lattice wood flying. I called her name but she did not stop, did not seem to hear me. I walked slowly towards her, through an ocean of agonized screaming and frenzy that

was not coming from my friends, not coming from my friends. When I was right behind her I could see the stick baby was actually a rifle, perhaps an Armalite? There was blood on her wrists and the hole in the wall was getting deeper.

‘Let me go!’ she screamed but the rifle would release her, would not drop. I grabbed her but she sent me flying backwards, a panic strength beyond her size. I stumbled backwards, tripped over the mattress and when I found my feet I started to run. The dog that I am, I ran away and left her. I left all three, me who insisted we risk it and go back to the house. I took the stairs two at a time and what I saw in the dying light of that front room as I looked back will stay with me forever.

I jumped out the first floor window, did not even bother with the drain pipe, landed badly on my right ankle, the pain glassy and fantastic, but I did not stop running, God forgive me, I did not stop. I heard the first shot, muffled and dulled, as I reached the corner. I think that was Jake and the pistol. Then there was more, sharper and faster, probably Blondie firing the rifle.

I kept going, deeper and deeper into Battle Lands, until I was sure I was lost, to get as much distance between me and whatever had happened back at the house. My ankle dragged behind me, I could feel it was swollen, like a Belfast bap in my boot. The terrain changed under foot, from laid concrete to old cobble stones, and I kept going. Eventually I sat down in the middle of a street with no name. Went to check my watch, but my watch was gone, probably lost it when I jumped. I took a deep breath, and then another, calmer but none the wiser. I looked back the way I had come, into the darkness. My friends were back there, somewhere.

‘And you left them,’ I said. Of that treachery, there was no doubt whatsoever. But left them to what? ‘Something terrible happened,’ I said to the street. ‘It was...’ My voice tailed away. I had no idea what happened, not then and not now. All I knew was that things had changed for ever on the flick of a switch, or on one bad move. Sometimes in this life the pieces just don’t fit together. I heaved myself back to my feet.

I saw a light, dim but unmistakable, coming from a building on the corner several streets away. It was there, and then it was gone. I gazed into the gloom, and shivered, peering into the darkness ahead, searching for that light. For the second time that night I turned my back on my friends, and shuffled on. A crack of yellow light appeared. I was close enough now so I could see what it was: A door, wafting open ever so slightly, as though on a draft of air. It closed again, replacing light with darkness.

I stopped and stood outside a derelict old pub, its front window smashed. There was no furniture, just the wooden bar over looked by vacant shelves. Polystyrene ceiling tiles were scattered round the floor like white stepping stones through the pool of standing water. No life and no light, but then the door inched opened. The same mild yellow glow bled out from the dark and empty interior of that pub, impossible but it did. And with it sounds of life within, hushed voices in guttural conversation, the clink of bottles. The door started to suck shut and I reached out and held it, partly expecting it to close on my fingers and crush them, but it stopped without protest. I pulled it open, spilling more light on the narrow footpath and out on to the cobbled street, and I looked inside.

Wall lights gently glowed, giving the place a warm, cozy feel. They were reflected in the bottles of spirits, now packed on the shelf behind the bar. Two men sat on high stools, their backs to me, next to them a small television cased in an oversized wooden frame. Standing by them was a bar man with a trim black beard and white apron, talking to both, looking earnest. He did not acknowledge me as I stepped over the threshold.

'Spare me some silver, son?' I looked to the source of the voice. An old man slouched by the door. No more than a stick for the tattered coat he was wearing. I reached into my jeans and pulled out some change. I gave him ten pence and his fingers closed over the coin, and he collapsed back into his great coat, my fee paid. I approached the bar, dragging my ankle, could smell old pipe smoke, beer and stale piss. The bar man set me up a glass of stout before I could speak, pouring it from a brown bottle with no label, the yellowish white head swimming into life as he tipped the glass to meet the beer. I watched it settle, held the glass tightly, needing its cold weight, feeling its realness. I raised it to my mouth and drank deeply, wincing at the cool bitterness of the black ale, but stopping only to breathe before raising the schooner again and draining it, froth and all.

Three times that night my glass was filled.

Each time, I had changed, and so had that bar. And each draught was more bitter and filled with more pain than the last. By the time I'd drained the first glass, my chin was rough with a beard where moments before it had been smooth to the touch. The television was on and I watched the news, saw that an I.R.A prisoner had died on hunger strike. There was a picture of him, propped up on pillows on an institutional looking bed, chest bare, long hair and

beard. He was impossibly gaunt, eyes looking too big for his face, full of zeal and fear. Those eyes, I knew those eyes.

‘That’s Jake,’ I said, shaking my head, but no-one turned. I looked away from the television, closed my eyes, wishing it away. When I opened them, the bar was quiet again, another stout had been poured, a sweat of condensation on the side of the glass. I ran a finger down it, making a thin line of darker black. The hairs on my hand now had a sprinkling of grey. My finger came to rest on a folded newspaper.

I turned my head slowly to the left, but the tender with the beard and apron was gone, in his place a middle aged woman with peroxide hair and a massive chest. The two drinkers were gone too. I lifted the paper, my other hand reaching for the beer, certain, of nothing else in that moment, that I was going to need.

I looked at the front page.

*11 DEAD IN TRICK OR TREAT BLOODBATH*

Under the headline was a mug shot of Decky. He looked older, harder, that weakness that I once relied on to break was gone. Decky had burst into a pub on the other side of town on Halloween night, shouting trick or treat. Decky had murdered ten people. Before he could get away, the police made him number eleven.

‘What happened to you Decky?’ I asked, staring at his photograph. No reply, so I raised the stout and drank it all down and then I closed my eyes and put my head on the bar and waited.

When I looked up, the place was packed with people, standing room only, apart from me, still seated at the bar. I glanced over and a young man was now serving; as young as I was when this story started. I turned on my stool; saw the television was now a massive, booming screen of colour and sound. The news came on. I could see the twisted wreckage of something that looked like it had once been a car. I turned away, hoping to see another stout waiting for me, to drink it away before I heard the news I knew was coming, but there was nothing. I covered my ears and felt the rough sponginess of a thick beard. In the dirty mirror behind the bar I saw it was as white as a wedding dress, same as you see today.

Even over the noise of the bar; I heard it, her name.

Brigit McBride. Blondie.

She was in the car when the bomb she was carrying exploded prematurely. She was an unrepentant old veteran who had kept the war going even as others had sued for peace. Blondie was never one step down, to back off. I buried my face in my jumper, and for the second time that day, if it was a day, I wept, I cried until I had nothing more to give and then I cried more, cried dry. Ah Blondie, Decky was not the only one who loved you after all, it was me Blondie, I was the first, and I loved you best.

The stout was delivered at last. And this time I drank it even faster than before. As I set the sudsy glass down I saw that the place was empty once more, the television was dark and blank, and there, looking up, reflected on the screen was the old man you see today, sitting on my stool.

'Time,' said the young fella, and set a bag down on to the bar in front of me. It was plastic, once white, but now a dirty yellow. I knew if I touched its inner sleeve it would be rough and coated in old, dried glue. Inside were three empties, the brown stout bottles I had finished.

'These are yours,' he said, 'you can't chuck them but you can trade them, house rules.' I nodded; these were mine, one for Jake, one for Decky, one for Blondie. Three empties, that I owned, mine until I traded them. I lifted the bag and though the bottles clanked hollowly, they seemed full, oh so very full. I have never looked inside those bottles, always been scared to, and I don't mind admitting that. I wonder will you ever have the courage to look, because now they're yours.

When I left the bar, I was not in Battle Lands, of course not; those ruined streets are a long time gone. Nor was it 1977, I can't really be sure when of when. But feels like a long time since I emerged as an old man, staggering out with my bag of hurt and loss and regret, a bag I could never drop or throw away, no matter how hard I tried.

I have walked the streets of Belfast carrying that bag ever since. Until you came along, nobody seemed to see me at all, like I was just a dream, a bad old dream. When you offered to help carry it, I remembered what I was told; that I had to trade those empties, fair and square.

I had nothing else to trade you but the tale I have told you. And before you ask me, no, I don't want them back. Why not walk on a bit up the road? With any luck someone will eventually see you and maybe stop, offer to carry your burden for a while.

At least now you have a story to trade.

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**THE END**