

# call mother a lonely field

**LIAM CARSON**

*[extract from Chapter 4]*

I was born on the 22nd of February 1962, only seventeen years after the end of the Second World War. My mother still had unused ration books for powdered milk and eggs. We even had a gas mask and an air-raid warden's helmet. My mother would talk about the Belfast Blitz, when hundreds of Luftwaffe bombers laid waste to the city. She recalled how the people of the Falls fled to the safety of the Black Mountain. There they watched the city in flames. The seemingly endless waves of bombs turned the night sky into an incandescence that shone brighter than day.

By 1962, the Cold War had replaced the Nazi threat. Rosaries were said for the conversion of Russia. A few weeks before I was born, USA spy pilot Gary Powers had been released in Berlin. In the Kremlin, Khrushchev—Stalin's immediate successor—was in power. On the day of my birth, John F. Kennedy had announced plans to land men on the moon and the space race had begun.





Is féidir do aon duine buachan . . . aon am . . . aon áit.  
Triail d'ádh le teicéad no cuid de thicéad. Is furasta an  
triail . . . agus féach an duifear a dhéanfadh buachan.

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CAP

Mooreland is immediately adjacent to the North's biggest GAA ground, Casement Park, named after Irish patriot and anti-imperialist, Sir Roger Casement. My family's move coincided with the ground's opening. The August 1953 issue of *An tUltach* reported an occasion that was as much religious and political as it was sporting. The Milltown band played 'Faith of Our Fathers'. Cardinal Dalton spoke in English and in Irish, telling the crowds that Casement Park was an embodiment of patriotism, of loyalty to the traditions of the Irish race, and a testament to the indestructible spirit of the nation. Soil from Croke Park was mixed with the soil of Casement Park, showing what *An tUltach* described (using non-standard spelling) as 'an aontacht do-scartha eadar tuaisceart agus dusceart na tíre seo' (the unbreakable bond between the north and south of this country). Dalton spoke of Roger Casement, of his courage in defying the might of the British Empire. Until such time as Casement's remains were released from Pentonville Prison and allowed a proper funeral in his native land, the park would be his lasting memorial, an example to the youth of the country.

The house in Mooreland felt big to me as a boy. I had dreams and waking nightmares of obliteration and annihilation. When there was thunder and lightning, I would try to find the place in the house where I felt safe, where nothing could touch me. I would squeeze into the gas meter space under the stairs. Above the door, there was a little wooden ledge. There, for many years, I kept a model howitzer cannon; a spring lever allowed you to fire bits of broken matchstick. As I crouched, I imagined the sky as huge white egg cracking open, the heavens opening in an explosion of blinding light. And then time itself froze into a terrifying silence. In my sleep, I dreamt of nothingness, a void of brilliant white, shimmering into eternity. It was a nothing in

which no matter how far you went, you were still in nothingness, with nothing eternally before you.

On Sundays, crowds would flood the streets. Casement Park was also the Falls Road trolleybus terminus. We lay at the outer edge of the city, where new streets and open fields adjoined each other. My brother Pat wandered through the wilderness of Colin Glen, climbing trees, scrambling through bushes, collecting birds' eggs. He would carefully prick the eggs with a pin, blow and suck on the holes until the eggs were hollow. Then the eggs were gently packed in sawdust, kept in biscuit tins. Collecting was an obsession that possessed us. Cards from sweet cigarette packs. Stamps. Coins. Matchboxes. Beer mats.

In the Dump—a small patch of wasteland running between Mooreland Park and Stockman's Lane—my friends and I built a den. A trench was excavated, lined with old carpeting, roofed with corrugated metal, a hole forming an improvised chimney. We roasted spuds in a fire, their skins all sooty. I would head home late in the evening, my face smoky and warm. There were dens everywhere—in Casement Park, deep in the overgrowth between the banks and the ground's walls; in the briar jungle between the M1 motorway and Musgrave Park Hospital. Anywhere secretive.

There's a Robert Crumb cartoon where we see the changes over time in an American small town. A few shacks in the middle of a pastoral Eden; then comes the town hall and the sheriff's office; a decade later the railroad comes to town; then tram lines and telegraph cables appear. Buildings fall into disrepair, are demolished.

So it was with Andersonstown. Mooreland Park runs parallel with Stockman's Lane, home to 1930s houses and ex-servicemen's cottages. The largest house in the lane belonged to writer and actor Joe Tomelty for many years. Joe was famed throughout Belfast as the writer

of the hugely popular BBC radio sitcom *The McCooeys*. He appeared in films such as John Huston's *Moby Dick*, and Carol Reed's *Odd Man Out*, a haunting noir tale of an IRA gunman on the run in a snowbound Belfast. Joe's house later became a shelter for down-and-outs, and my mother was a volunteer there. It had stables, and an orchard.

In Andersonstown, there were the remnants of the original leafy suburb on the edge of the countryside. Not far from Mooreland was the local lawn tennis and bowling club, and the big houses and long gardens of Fruithill Park and the Andersonstown Road; behind Owenvarragh Park, there was still an open field through which flowed the stream that gave its name to the street—*abhainn bharra*, the river of the staves, which then becomes the Blackstaff River at Stockman's Lane.

At the age of six I played with my friends in the Doherty's front garden, where we created a childish simulacrum of our immediate world. We fashioned a little suburb. A bush became a shop. We took on the roles of mummies and daddies, with jobs, duties and responsibilities.

We even had a car—a magnificent machine built by Seánie Doherty. Seán was older than us, and a mix between Pied Piper and resident mad scientist. He seemed to more or less live in the family coal-shed, his laboratory. Here he spent most of his free time surrounded by electric bric-a-brac—batteries, wires, spark plugs, circuit boards, bulbs, bits of televisions and radios. In his hands the average Belfast 'guider' (an improvised go-kart)—became an imitation Model T Ford. He even used a proper car seat and steering wheel. There were working lights, and a real horn that beeped.

Our domain extended from Mooreland into the neighbouring areas of Stockman's and Owenvarragh. In the 'Mushroom'—a little

mushroom-shaped cul-de-sac off Stockman's Lane—we climbed the electricity pylon. We'd roll up scraps of newspaper and smoke them. We enthusiastically ate chewing gum scraped from the pavement, drank rainwater from rusted railings. Our parents would make us packed lunches of jam sandwiches, crisps, apples and orange juice when we headed off on one of our expeditions. We packed our ex-Army issue schoolbags with notebooks, pens, torches. And off we'd go to explore the local storm-drain system. We'd slip on our wellies and walk along the Owenvarragh River, vanishing into the murk of the storm drain. After a hundred yards you came to a metal grille that blocked you from going any farther. But there was a ledge, where we would sit and picnic.

In my early childhood, my closest friend was Declan Mc Cavana. Our houses were barely fifty feet from each other. Our favourite reading included *The Book of Inventions* by Leonard De Vries. Its introduction promised a 'voyage of discovery', in which readers were encouraged to undertake 'amazing scientific experiments... performed with simple, everyday things that can be found in almost every household'. Declan and I made a telephone from string and tin cans. In the evening, Declan sat in his bathroom, while I knelt on my bed, leaning out the window, and we'd chat by phone.

On television we loved *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau*, where Cousteau's crew constantly overcame adversity ('Today the *Calypso* was attacked by a giant squid. Unfortunately, five of our crew died... but as you know, life on the *Calypso* must go on,' became an in-joke of ours). In various ways, we re-enacted the Second World War, its presence still potent in the popular imagination. In the 1960s,

British comics—the *Victor*, the *Hotspur*, the *Commando* series—were full of brave Brits in battle with nasty Nazis. We'd buy Airfix models of Stukas, Hurricanes, Spitfires, Messerschmitts; using thread, we suspended them from our bedroom ceilings in mock dog-fight scenarios. We played with Action Men. You could buy different uniforms for them—a British commando, an American GI, a German infantryman, a Free French Resistance fighter. The Ma and Da fully indulged me in my Action Man obsession. The Da gave them names—Frank and Joe Harris, two American GIs (they could never be British soldiers)—and spun yarns about their heroic battles against the Japanese in the Pacific. The two brothers were always saving each other. In winter, the Ma knitted them jumpers and scarves to keep them warm.

What Declan and I—and most of the kids in Mooreland—also had in common was our parents' devotion to the Church. They wanted to see us believe as they did, to see that prayer worked. They sought to shelter us in their faith. In Declan's house I would often be roped into the family rosary. One night I hallucinated, and saw the Virgin staring through the window at me. At mass I drifted on waves of song and incense.

*Strength and protection may His Passion be;  
O blessed Jesus, hear and answer me!  
Deep in Thy wounds, Lord, hide and shelter me,  
So shall I never, never part from Thee.*

My mother was small, like my father. She was strong. Her arms were muscular. On sunny days she would feed wet clothes through the mangle, turning the hand crank. She baked apple cakes and haystacks—buns covered in honey and coconut. On winter morn-

ings she made my Shredded Wheat with warm milk. She was always in movement, walking, scrubbing, hoovering, painting. In the late afternoon she would sit in a deckchair with a newspaper and nod off. She invested all she had in us, her children. Ever fearful for us, ever wanting to protect. In company she would shuffle slightly, shyly, from foot to foot.



It is nearing October again; it is nearly my mother's birthday, a time when I will always think of her. I remember autumnal walks with my mother and father. Down Mooreland Park, then Stockman's Lane, past Musgrave Park. Over to the Lagan, and along the towpath to Stranmillis, or sometimes up the Black Mountain, stopping at Hannahstown graveyard, down the Springfield Road, Belfast a carpet of gold and brown in the mellow light.

I remember a particular walk on the Lisburn Road, heading into town. It is after Sunday dinner. The light already seems to be fading. Opposite Drumglass Park—where I can still remember the swings being tied up on a Sunday—an old woman approaches us. Would we join her for a cup of tea? She's lonely and hasn't spoken to another soul for days on end. And so we enter the gloom of her house. Peeling patterned wallpaper. The smell of age and abandonment. She makes a pot of tea and serves us biscuits. She brings us into the hallway to show us pictures of her husband. He died many years ago. The photographs show him in the full dress uniform of a British soldier. Her children have grown up, and she rarely hears from them now. Her face is whiskery, crumpled, and she wears layers of clothes. We stay for hours, the Ma and Da listening to her story. As she sits and talks, she is framed by light from her living-room window, growing dimmer as time passes. We emerge into twilight, the streets awash with rain sparkling in the car headlights. As we leave, the Da tells her he will remember her in his prayers. She asks us to call again. And so we do. Over the next year, every few months, we will call in to see her, to see how she's keeping. One day she is simply not there, there is no answer to our knocking. We peer through the windows, the letter box. There is only darkness and silence. My father makes enquiries of the neighbours, and is told she is dead. The house lies empty for years after, decaying, crumbling.

The Da takes Breandán and I to see the Twelfth. We sit on the stairs at the side of a shop, and watch *Na Fir Bhui*—the Orangemen—and their bands marching along the Lisburn Road, heading for the field at Finaghy. He waves to work colleagues he recognises, and they smile or wave back. Throughout his life my father had numerous Protestant friends whom he held in high esteem. They were men who

shared his values—traditional men, family men, Christian men. In Caitlín's I find an old Bible given as a present to the Da. It is inscribed: 'Although we are Catholic and Protestant, we share in the salvation of the Blood of the Lamb. To my brother in Christ.' My Da revered Winston Churchill as a great Englishman, and loved his oratory, the speeches that could stir people's hearts.

On Saturday mornings we'd often go to Belfast City Cemetery, and the Da would make us origami boats that we'd set sail in the fountain. As the municipal graveyard, those buried there were mostly Protestant. Their graves had urns, angels; the paths were straight—the huge cemetery swept up the length of the Whiterock Road. From it, you had commanding views across the city, over to the Lisburn Road. At the height of the Troubles, few Protestants were prepared to go up the Falls. The solution was Cemetery Sunday, a day on which people travelled all over the city to visit the graves of loved ones. The flowers were piled high at the graveyard gates.

Sometimes the Da brought me to loyalist Sandy Row, where I'd get a lucky bag, sweets or a comic. Sandy Row was renowned for its shoe shops, sweet shops and toy shops. It was also home to the largest tobacco factory in the world, Gallaher's. The business was incorporated on 28 March 1896 to 'carry on in all their branches the businesses of tobacco, cigar, cigarettes and snuff manufacture'.

My father introduced me to these streets and they belonged to him as much as they did to any Protestant. We would admire the decorations for the Twelfth, the red-white-and-blue bunting. There was a huge ceremonial Orange arch, supported by two crenellated towers. It was topped by a representation of William of Orange—King Billy himself, sword held high.

The arch displayed a range of loyal-order symbols—a pentacle

embodying friendship and mutual dependency; a coffin, essentially a *memento mori*; a three-branched candlestick not altogether unlike a Jewish *menorah*, representing the Holy Trinity. Curiously enough, there is a Jewish synagogue in Sandy's Row in London's East End. Originally a Huguenot chapel, it was acquired by Dutch Ashkenazai Jews in 1867. Mostly working men, many of them were fruit traders or cigar makers. To this day, the synagogue's interior is orange, a reminder of its Dutch origins.

Saturday nights, the Da took Breandán and myself to York Street Station, down by the docks. Here the trains arrived from the Larne boat, loaded with mail from England, Scotland, Wales, beyond. We'd help my father carry postbags to the Royal Mail vans. In the 1970s, York Street Station was still an old-world place, a final vestige of Victorian Belfast. In the bar—aged wood panelling, stained-glass windows—old men would down pints of Guinness and scan the pages of *Ireland's Saturday Night* and the *Belfast Telegraph*. We drank cokes and ate crisps; the Da would have a smoke and a pint. Outside the ferries lay docked along Donegall Quay, the cranes looming over the Lagan. I remember *an clapsholas*, the gloaming, the evening turning to nightfall in Belfast. Huge clouds of starlings would spiral around the river's bridges. Sweeping down to the water's surface, swooping under their arches, and then hurtling up again. Above Donegall Square, pigeons flocked to the parapets of the City Hall and the department stores of Royal Avenue. A cacophony of bird-screech rising above the dim roar of evening traffic.

I remember one blazing Saturday afternoon in July. I am walking with my father, down the few remaining streets of Belfast's Sailortown. The Da is sweating. We go into York Street Station to cool down. By the ticket office, there is a glass case, and inside it there is a model of an old

steam train; its side is cut open, exposing the intricate workings of the engine. My father gives me an old penny to put in the slot, the pistons jerk into action, the wheels turn, magical, hypnotic. I am entranced.

On Tuesdays I'd accompany my father to Clonard Monastery for the Men's Confraternity. I remember us on the way up Clonard Street, a man lighting the last gas street lamp in the city. I remember evenings, the Black Mountain darkening over Belfast. I remember the smell of damp clothes after rain. Clonard was huge: candles lit everywhere, incense. A decade of the rosary would be recited. A Redeemer would preach. The men would sing in unison:

*Be Thou my breast-plate, my sword for the fight;  
Be Thou my armour, and be Thou my might.  
Thou my soul's shelter, and Thou my high tower:  
Raise Thou me Heavenward, O Power of my power.*

I feel the rasp of my father's beard. I am five years old. He rubs his chin against my soft boy's cheek and tells me one day I'll have stubble like him, that one day I'll also need to shave. It is bedtime. He doesn't read me stories. He doesn't need to. Like his father before him, the Da is an expert storyteller, a walking book. What he reads, he remembers, and what he doesn't remember, he makes up as he goes along. Interspersed with his stories of Irish heroes, there were his own creations—including Koffeedoff:

*Koffeedoff had a very bad cough and a very bad cough had he  
But he got well when he got the smell from the top of his  
lollipop tree.*

The BBC television mast that topped the Black Mountain was the lollipop tree, my father told us.

The stories that moved me the most were those of sorrow and exile, of those who could not return to their home, those who were banished. The story of Colm Cille's return to Ireland from his self-imposed exile in Iona I found unbearably sad. As an act of repentance for his sins Colm Cille had taken an oath never to set foot on Irish soil again, never to look at the beauty of the land and of its people again. When he attended the Convention at Drum Ceatt, he arrived with sods of Scottish soil under his feet, and was blindfolded.

The stories contained worlds nullified by the passage of time. Oisín returns from Tír na n-Óg. Once he touches Irish soil, he ages centuries on the spot. Saint Patrick tells him that his time is gone forever. The Fianna ride out no more. They have even been forgotten, or people merely think the Fianna were a myth, that they never really existed. Oisín's world—his friends, his gods, his beliefs, his codes—is no more.

In the story of the Children of Lir, Lir's evil second wife transforms his beloved children into swans. A curse that will last 900 years. For 300 years they live in a lake near Lir, who visits them daily to tell them of his love, but they then must spend a further 300 years in the Straits of Moyle. They leave, never to see their father again. As they fly to Inish Glora for the final phase of their curse, they pass by their father's castle, now a ruin. Eventually they find sanctuary in a little church, with the holy man Mochua. When the curse finally wanes, they age aeons, wrinkle, wither and die. A statue of the Children of Lir is the centrepiece of Dublin's Garden of Remembrance in Parnell Square, and symbolises the rebirth of the Irish nation after 900 years of English tyranny.

The Da also sang to me. 'Henry Joy' was my favourite, this tale of a great man who instilled men with the courage to defy an empire,

to fight for liberty, equality and fraternity, only to suffer defeat and be murdered on the gallows.

It was to Cave Hill that Henry Joy McCracken fled in the aftermath of the Battle of Antrim. He found refuge with local gamekeeper David Bodell, whose limestone cottage nestled within the deep woods by Ben Madigan. Henry Joy was in love with one of the gamekeeper's daughters, Mary, whom he had secretly married.

Cathal O'Byrne's *As I Roved Out*, one of my Da's favourite books, contains many wonderful descriptions of and stories about Cave Hill. The caves themselves—five in total—were reputedly man-made, but by whom and for what reason, nobody knows. The third, fourth and fifth caves are linked by a tunnel. They were the perfect hiding place for anyone seeking a safe haven from the law.

'Henry Joy' is a song of faith and friendship; it is also a song of loss and sorrow. It tells the story of Henry Joy and the United Irishmen from the point of view of a young follower from the Glens of Antrim, stirred into action by the sound of fife and drum, and 'the martial tramp of men'. In its final verse, the narrator watches Henry Joy walking to his death, his sister Mary by his side, and it tells of their farewell kiss.

*In Belfast town, they built a tree  
And the redcoats mustered there  
I saw him come as the beat of a drum  
Rolled out in the barrack square  
He kissed his sister, went aloft  
And waved a last good-bye  
My God he died, I turned and I cried  
They have murdered Henry Joy*



What defines the life and death of Henry Joy is love. One of McCracken's workmen, the English calico printer William Thompson, refused to testify against his employer, despite being given 200 lashes. Prior to his execution, McCracken asked to see his minister and friend, the Reverend Sinclair Kelburn. On arriving, he immediately burst into tears, declaring, 'Oh, Harry, you did not know how much I loved you.'

I see Henry Joy perched on the parapet of McCracken's Fort with his telescope, watching for British warships plying the waters of Belfast Lough. When the Da reaches the song's sad end, my eyes and cheeks are wet.