

WEST BELFAST

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CHAPTER 7

THE POGROMS

John and his father stood on the beach, looking out to sea. Behind them on a blanket sat Catherine, and around her, munching sandwiches, picking out grains of sand, and thirstily drinking orange juice, were the rest of the family. John had come back to Belfast after finishing a course at Ruskin College on trade union and maritime law, on trade regulations, how to conduct meetings, take and log complaints. As a result of a strike three years earlier seamen had won shipboard recognition and had pushed aside corrupt trade union officials, replacing them with their own representatives.

The family had rented an old cottage in Downings, County Donegal, and now their holiday was coming to an end. Their cottage had no television or radio and Catherine cooked on an old range, Jimmy acting as the chief stoker feeding the range lumps of turf.

One day they had driven to Gweedore and Burtonport. On another day John took Raymond and Jimmy to Errigal, the highest mountain in the county, and they had to climb to the top to earn their lemonade and chocolate.

A couple of nights Peter, Catherine and John walked to the Singing Pub, a thatched house which was tucked up a lane behind a few trees, where they had a few drinks and listened to traditional music.

Catherine watched John and Peter talking, as if man-to-man. John skimmed a stone across the water, his longish hair flicking with each throw. He was twenty one but he was still her child.

"This holiday was a great idea. I really enjoyed it."

"So did I, da. It was a good break and I think my mammy's had a nice time too."

"Tea up!" Catherine called again.

They had decided to leave early because trouble was expected in Derry where the Apprentice Boys were marching. For almost a year marches organised by the Civil Rights Movement, demanding

justice and reforms for Catholics, had been attacked and a number of civilians had lost their lives at the hands of the RUC.

When they crossed the border they were stopped by police who said there was trouble ahead and they should take a detour. Back in Belfast, before even unpacking, John switched on the television. The rioting was serious and widespread. The next day he met up with his old friends and the only topic was the Bogside where the police had lost control, couldn't gain access to the area and were being resisted by young people throwing rocks and petrol bombs from behind barricades and from the roof of Rossville Flats. It was becoming an epic battle and one so serious that the Irish government was calling for the UN to intervene.

Stormont, the seat of Unionist power, announced that it was drafting in reinforcements. The civil rights organisations called for rallies and protests in towns across the north to demonstrate solidarity with the Bogside and to tie down police resources.

After three days of continuous fighting the government mobilised a paramilitary force, the B Specials. Within hours, 'B' men had opened fire on an unarmed Catholic crowd, wounding three people. More protests were organised in reaction.

John and Felix met up with Gerard, then joined with several hundred people who marched to Springfield Road barracks to hand in a petition about police brutality. At every street they were joined by people defiantly singing Irish rebel songs. When the sergeant refused to accept their petition they smashed some of his windows before marching back down the Falls to Hastings Street Barracks. There, three policemen kitted in riot gear, stood at the front door. The weather was mild but the policemen shuffled from one foot to the other as if from cold.

"That's the bastard that arrested me during the riots!" someone shouted from the back. "The one with the Buddy Holly glasses!"

There followed a fusillade of bottles and bricks. The policemen retreated and radioed to nearby mobile patrols. Armoured cars turned from Millfield into Hastings Street and drove at the crowds, scattering them. John and Felix ran into side streets.

At eleven trouble broke out in North Belfast where Catholics and Protestants fought each other with stones and bottles. Around the same time youths on the Falls broke into a car showroom, pushed Volkswagen cars into the street and set fire to them. At other points

tyres were laid across the road in defiance of the authorities; but still the RUC stayed away.

"What do you think?" said Felix.

"Looks like they're just gonna leave us alone. Most of them have probably already left for Derry and there's nobody to take us on," said John.

"I hope so," said Gerard. "Our Dominic says that if Derry falls, then we're finished."

"Ambulance driver just told me that loyalists are gathering in their hundreds on the Shankill," said Felix.

"We'll have to keep our eye on them," said John, aware of how vulnerable this area had been in the past.

"We're gonna attack Springfield Road Barracks, okay?" said Dominic, Gerard's brother. "You want to join us, get milk bottles and start siphoning petrol."

It was after midnight when the crowd crept up the street before rushing onto the main road. Their petrol bombs mostly fell short of the barracks although large flames momentarily licked the front of the building. A policeman on the first floor fired his revolver at the crowd and wounded two people. Police vehicles then raced towards the barracks and the crowd ran back into Colligan Street before stopping in McQuillan Street where an informal conference was hurriedly held.

"Jesus! Did you hear that!"

"Were they real bullets or blanks?"

"The bastards!"

"Let's get more petrol bombs."

They returned to the scene and attacked the barracks but were warned off when an officer opened fire with a machine gun over their heads. They scattered but were satisfied with the night's activity.

John was due to go back to sea on Sunday night but was undecided. The next day's news was again dominated by events in Derry where the RUC was suffering serious defeats.

A soft blue mist hung over the Falls Road that night as protestors again gathered at street corners. News that British soldiers were replacing the police in Derry had not reached the crowds.

John, Felix and Gerard went to Dominic's flat. Dominic tuned a radio and they were able to eavesdrop on police transmissions. These reported large crowds of loyalists gathering on the Shankill Road.

The three young men went out to the forecourt of Divis Tower where people were congregating, some armed with hurls. Many families who lived in streets between the Falls and the Shankill boarded up their windows before moving out for the night.

"Our Dominic's quite worried about the situation," said Gerard.

"Aren't we all," said John.

"No, I mean about the IRA. He said it isn't ready. Because of disagreements and rows a lot of them have fallen away. Everybody's running around in a panic trying to find guns."

"That sounds a bit paranoid, if you ask me," said John.

A crowd marched on Hastings Street Barracks. Those at the front pelted the building with stones and bottles. Two men rushed from the street behind the barracks and warned the crowd that armoured cars were coming.

"Jesus, they've got machine guns mounted!" said John when he saw the first vehicle.

Crowds from the Shankill Road began advancing on Dover Street and Percy Street, smashing windows. Hand-to-hand fighting broke out as people tried to defend their homes. A rough border was established behind which each side retreated, exchanging stones and bottles. Two shot-gun blasts were fired from the loyalist side and then a line of uniformed B Specials appeared with batons and charged at the nationalists who turned and ran until joined by reinforcements.

Loyalists, supported by the police, were now invading Cupar Street and Conway Street. They tore boards from windows, smashed the glass and set fire to the houses. Some families who had stayed, believing the police would protect them, fled down the streets in their pyjamas, lucky to escape with their lives.

A burst of gunfire from an armoured car scattered nationalists who tried to turn back the petrol bombers. The rattle from the Browning guns could be heard for miles around and tracers could be seen in the night sky. Two people were shot in Conway Street, two others in Balaclava Street, and one person was wounded in Raglan Street.

John and some men were trying to erect a barricade to protect the houses of Ardmoulin Avenue when the police launched a baton charge. Humber and Shorland cars from the direction of the Shankill broke through. But behind them was an army of civilians carrying sticks and hatchets and petrol bombs and Union flags. They overpowered the locals and burst into Divis Street, singing and shouting. They looted the local bar, the Arkle Inn, before torching it. All around, burning homes and shops lit up the night sky.

"They're coming for the flats! They're gonna burn the flats!" screamed a woman. John looked down towards the city centre. A phalanx of Shorlands, Humbers and Commers were lined up across Divis Street. Behind them were riot police. If they were able to join up with the loyalists at Dover Street the flats themselves could be attacked and burned with catastrophic consequences.

"Where the fuck is the IRA?" shouted a man.

"Never mind that, start moving! You lads, get onto the roof of Whitehall! You crowd, form a chain and start passing up anything you can!"

Stones, bricks, petrol bombs, pieces of gratings and scaffolding tubes were transported up to the fighters who hurled the missiles at the advancing ranks of the riot police. The defenders were relieved to see that the police were starting to pull back.

From Gilford Street fire was directed at the loyalists. One man fell dead and three policemen were wounded. Police returned fire and some moments later a Shorland sped up Divis Street, slowed to a steady cruise, trained its heavy machine gun on the flats and let loose with a burst of automatic fire. John couldn't believe his eyes.

"Jesus Christ! They're mad!"

"They're gonna kill us! They're gonna kill us all!" people were shouting from the balconies. A young boy with a bullet wound to his head was carried out to an ambulance at the back of the maisonettes. John made way for those carrying a wounded man down the stairs in Whitehall Row. He was laid on the ground and a priest, having read him the Last Rites, then announced that he was dead.

It all seemed unreal, nightmarish, terrifying and apocalyptic. The night sky aglow with the burning of houses, shops and factories.

Hysterical shouts and screams, the noise of heavy gunfire, the acrid smell of smoke poisoning the air of a summer's night.

Crowds gathered to protect St Peter's Chapel. John ran with others to the front of the road where a school, St Comgall's, was now coming under attack.

Felix shouted, "Here comes the IRA! They've got guns!"

John was expecting to see a Flying Column, not a middle-aged man carrying a machine gun along with two others.

"Any of you know how to get into the school?" the man asked. John said he was familiar with its layout. He broke a window, unfastened the latch and let the men into the corridor.

"Right. You can leave now. Go on, get out!" he said. John was disappointed, a bit angry, but they knew their business. Petrol bombs continued to crash against the solid walls of the school. From the roof of the building the IRA man opened fire towards Percy Street, wounding eight people. The loud roar of return fire from a Browning cut chunks of masonry out of the front walls and brought them back to reality. The IRA man reappeared a minute later and said, "Right, that'll do." Then he disappeared. He moved to another part of the district and opened fire to give the impression not just to the loyalists and the RUC, but also to the nationalists that they were well armed.

"Have you heard the news?"

"That kid, Rooney, has died in hospital. About fourteen've been shot in North Belfast, two dead."

"And The Specials shot dead a civil righter in Armagh. Houses are on fire on the Crumlin Road... There's rioting all over the North."

In the back streets the injured were being nursed in rudimentary 'field' hospitals. Others were making petrol bombs or feeding the menfolk who returned every now and again for a short rest.

Around 3.30 a.m. the last gunfire of the night was heard from Divis Street where an armoured car again opened fire on St Comgall's School though the IRA men had left there long ago.

"What a night," yawned John. Thank God, it's over."

"Pray we never see another like it again."

The rival crowds, apparently drained of all energy, kept their distance. Up towards the Shankill the RUC and the B Specials sat on the kerbs among the loyalists. They were being given tea and cigarettes. It was an eerie peace.

Families who had lost everything stood in shock. Many houses had survived and during the lull men came to retrieve whatever bits of furniture or belongings they could.

John sat down and someone gave him a cigarette, the first he'd smoked in six years.

"There's the gypsies!" shouted Felix. "With lorries!"

A big, stocky man, who looked unperturbed at the 'war scene' before him, climbed out of the cab of the first lorry and a local man ran over, shook his hand and thanked him.

"We'll never forget this, I promise." He came back and said, "Come and help us take stuff out of the houses." He could see that people were reluctant to go back down the street. "Don't worry. They've realised what they've done. They'll have been given orders to do no more shooting. They're bloody well ashamed of themselves."

All public transport had been withdrawn. Those walking to work from other districts stopped and were appalled at the devastation. Though they had heard the gunfire they hadn't realised that the Falls had been under such sustained, violent attack. People were loading pieces of furniture on to the lorries provided by the gypsies. They were loading items onto handcarts, prams, or simply carrying chairs, tables and cardboard boxes of clothes by hand. Hundreds of others were prising up street flagstones and building barricades.

Some people gingerly went to inspect their homes despite being within striking distance if the loyalists so wished. Their windows had been broken but they hadn't been torched. Amongst the opposing faction were even neighbours whom they had grown up with.

As more people joined with families to lend a hand the loyalists got restless – as if they thought it was now their homes that were to be attacked. Scuffles and vicious fighting suddenly erupted. The police fired shots into the air and marched towards the Falls. As they advanced, a few yards at a time, people turned and ran. But behind the police came the loyalists who began setting fire to the houses, bit

by bit, until over two-thirds of the dwellings were ablaze. There was nothing anyone could do.

In the nearby Clonard area, two men with a shot-gun and a sporting rifle were in the monastery after it had received threats that it was going to be burned down. The attacks began that afternoon. Shots were first fired into the streets to clear them, then the mobs came in with petrol bombs and began burning Bombay Street. A fifteen year old boy who was defending his home was shot dead.

The situation was completely out of control. The Stormont government formally requested the intervention of the British Army, which was on standby, and by that night a small party of soldiers led by an officer made their way to Clonard Monastery where he met the rector and inspected the situation.

Further down the street the loyalists attacked the soldiers with petrol bombs and the British Army ran away. The mob then burned down the remainder of the houses in Bombay Street. When the soldiers returned they were again fired on, but this time they stood their ground and the trouble died down in the early hours of the morning.