

INTRODUCTION

‘Britain needs an Iron Lady.’

Margaret Thatcher, Speech to Conservative Rally,
Birmingham, 19 April 1979

IT'S THE 12TH OF October 1984. I am just eight years old. Me and my mum are stuck to the *BBC Nine O'Clock News* in this strange new flat. We sit cross-legged on bare floorboards with coats for cushions and watch ambulances, police cars and fire engines mee-maw, mee-maw in black-and-white on the portable balancing on top of a tea chest. A flurry of dusty black bits fluttered out when I helped my mum turn it upside down. I thought tea only came in bags until this morning when the removal van came to take us to Flat 1, 1 Magdalene Drive, Carfin. My dad is back at 25 Ardgour Place, Newarthill with the big colour telly. My wee sister, Teenie, has cried herself to sleep in my mum's lap. Our old life is crammed in the cardboard boxes bursting all around us. It's way past my bedtime but rules are already being broken.

My mum lifts an arm so I can snuggle in. She lights a Regal cigarette and shakes her head at the telly, tutting and pulling me closer. I can't get close enough. Blue smoke cloaks us.

‘Luck o’ the devil,’ she huffs, puffing away at the telly where this blonde woman rises from rubble again and again like a Cyberman off *Doctor Who*.

All around her the hotel is collapsing as bloody bodies are pulled out but she stays calm. She's talking to the BBC with a man's voice and even the police stop to listen. 'Life must go on as usual,' she insists, as if life will do exactly what she tells it.

'Shit disnae burn, Maggie won't,' says my mum, smoking at the portable, puffing extra fast, super deep like it's a race. I look up at her with questioning eyes. We shouldn't be here. 'He disnae like them, "cancer sticks", he calls them,' she confides, smoothing Teenie's blonde bobbed hair with her free hand, her nails chewed to nothing.

He is Logan and according to all the arguments I've overheard, he's the man my mum is leaving my dad for. Right now he's asleep in the next room because plumbers start early. We're not to wake him. He was waiting for us in the empty flat when we arrived with all our boxes. Not as tall as my dad but not as short as my mum, he stood totally still filling every room so we could hardly breathe. Without a word he handed her a key then pushed his face into hers.

'The weans,' she whispered, blushing and shuffling.

He looked down at Teenie then me, his mouth open, lips red like inside a cut. I held her hand tight and all the lines round everything sharpened. I breathed right in.

'So ah see,' he said slowly, before whipping a Stanley knife from the pocket of his blue boiler suit and slashing the top of a box. 'Ah'm Logan.'

The telly was first to get unpacked. The News was already on when Logan plugged it in. He thumped it hard just once and the picture cleared to show Maggie walking away from the bombed hotel. He shook his head and changed the channel but there she was again. Nine hours of unpacking later

and the News is still on and Maggie's still not dead. He can't believe it. Neither can my mum. They hate her and they say she hates Scotland, hates us. But all the people on the BBC seem glad she made it. Secretly, I am too. I don't want to see her dead. I don't know why – maybe just because everybody else does. She's not done anything to me. I'd like to brush the dust from her big blonde hair like she's a Girl's World and tell her it'll all be all right. Of course, I can't admit this.

'Bitch,' I say, the worst word I know, and flinch for a skelp.

But my mum says nothing, not even a 'God forgive you'. So I'm allowed to swear about Maggie. That's how bad she is.

My mum takes one last puff. I don't want her to go and sleep in that bed with him. I close my eyes as she drops her cigarette hissing into the dregs of a cuppa and imagine celebrating Maggie's miraculous escape with the shiny rich-looking people on the telly.

The Grand Hotel survives. So does Maggie. So will I.

‘There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then also to help look after our neighbour . . . There is no such thing as society.’

Margaret Thatcher, *Woman’s Own*,
23 September 1987

‘IT’S TIME TO PLAY the music, it’s time to light the lights,’ sings the big colour telly from downstairs at 25 Ardour Place, Newarthill.

‘Mum, it’s *The Muppet Show!*’ I jiggle as she stretches the towel between her arms ready to wrap me up tight before carrying me downstairs, a ritual I am ‘getting too big and too old for’ but which is still allowed if my dad’s out at work. ‘We’ll miss Kermit!’ I squeal, bursting through the brown-and-orange towel like a finishing line, across the cork floor towards the stairs.

‘Damian Leighton Barr, what have I told you about running in the house!’ The dreaded middle name only ever used when I’m in trouble.

Her words wrap around me with the towel as she scoops me up, carrying me down into the living room where the

curtain is going up on our most favourite programme in the whole world ever.

‘It’s time to put on make-up, it’s time to dress up right, it’s time to get things started!’ We sing along. I’m sitting on her lap cocooned in the towel, part of the set she boil-washes in Acdo every Sunday morning in the thundering twin-tub that she pulls out from under the scullery sink. They were a wedding present, she warns whenever I drop one on the floor. It’s my job to hand her the big wooden tongs for fishing things out when it’s stopped spinning.

Kermit announces that this week’s special guest is Superman! Christopher Reeve’s kiss curl smooches his forehead and me and my mum gasp.

‘You love that Superman, don’t you, son?’

I nod and leap off her lap and fly round naked, the towel is my cape. ‘D-D-D DA DA DAH! D-D-D DA DA DAH!’ I do the theme and land in her lap just in time to hear a key in the back door. Can it be? Is that my dad home early from the Craig? Are all the best things in the world happening at once? My head spins as my mum picks me up by the shoulders and stands me on the carpet, eyeing the sunburst clock that ticks over the electric fire where both bars burn because it’s bath night and she knows I like it roasty-toasty.

‘Daaaaaaaad!’ I zoom at him Superman-style, one arm out front, the other by my side, hitting the cold air he brings in from outside. My dad is always minerals. The whites of his eyes and his smiling falsers sparkle out from the coal-black rest of him.

My mum chunters, ‘Ocht, Glenn, the wean’s just had his bath!’ but she’s too late to stop me getting dirty and I don’t really think she wants to anyway.

I'm flying up in the sky, dipping and diving and soaring and swooping, the living-room carpet swirling brown and orange far below me. My dad has superpowers.

'How's ma Superboy?' he asks, grizzling in to kiss the back of my neck.

The stubble that's grown in on his twelve-hour shift tickles and he nuzzles me harder and I squeal and he doesn't stop and suddenly I can't feel his hands holding me any more and I'm hurtling towards the couch hundreds of miles below and then . . . 'Got ye!' I'm back in his gigantic hands. He'd planned it all along!

My mum stands, hands on her narrow hips, and pretends to disapprove when he produces two Strawberry Mivvis from the pocket of his donkey jacket. She is five foot nothing. He is six foot everything. She buzzes like a bee in a jar.

'Yous'll have tae brush yer teeth again!' He laughs, popping his false teeth out and rolling his eyes. We shriek like we always do.

Mum smile-tuts at my dad. 'An' you,' she says pointing upstairs. 'Time for yer bath.'

My pram is parked in the corner of the living room and I know it was mine because I remember lying in it looking out through the frothy lace fringe at faces smiling in. I remember bouncing along the pavement.

'Yer daddy wis the only man that pushed a pram in the whole village,' my mum boasts. 'He took you round and round the scheme. He wis that proud.'

I wasn't the first one in the pram. There was someone in it before me. A girl.

'Heaven,' says Granny Mac when I ask where she went, turning her head away from me with chopping-onions eyes. 'Wit's fur yae disnae go by yae.'

This is her favourite expression along with ‘Least said, soonest mended’, ‘Fly wi the craws ye get shot wi the craws’, ‘Hell mend yae’, ‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph’, ‘Aw fur coat and nae knickers’, and ‘Don’t come runnin’ tae me’ as in ‘Damian Leighton Barr, if you fall off that wall and break your leg don’t come runnin’ tae me!’ So I don’t ask again.

Soon the navy-blue Silver Cross pram with its prim white wheels will be rolling out again. Not with me because I’m getting to be a big boy now, already taking after my dad and only four. Nearly five! I tug on my blue-leather reins trying to get ahead.

‘Damy, ye’ll pull me over,’ my mum warns.

Women stop her in the Fine Fayre and ask if she puts me to bed in a Grobag. I’m nearly at her waist already.

‘You’ll have a wee sister soon,’ my mum says when I ask her why she looks so fat. ‘She’s in here,’ she explains, patting her moon belly, letting me in on the secret as usual.

I wonder how she got in there and how she’ll get out and what will happen to me when she does.

Technically bedtime is 7 p.m. But if my dad is still at the Craig I am allowed to stay up. Even if I’m tired – which I never am – my mum snuggles me next to her on the couch ‘for the company’. Sometimes she reads out loud from her Mills & Boons, sounding out all the words, even the ones I don’t understand. She cuts out the headlines from the *Daily Record* and we turn the letters into words and the words into stories. I learn that nurses always fancy doctors and a broken heart always heals. If she’s too tired to read we watch the telly.

Our telly has fancy faux teak trimmings and it smells burny when you clunk it on because the stour that gathers beyond my mum’s duster in the vents at the back sings as the valves

warm up. She wrinkles her tiny freckled nose at the smell, every time. Thanks to my dad's bulging Friday pay packet from the Craig we've got the only colour telly on Ardgour Place. We can watch three channels in a thousand colours. Two men from the Cooperative Department Store in Motherwell carry it in just in time for the Royal Wedding, which is taking attention away from my birthday.

'Wit a meringue!' says my mum when she sees Lady Di's dress.

'You'd no fill the front,' laughs Auntie Louisa, my mum's only sister in a band of six brothers.

She gets a look from Granny Mac who sounds out her name 'Lou-eez-a' while fingering her rosary.

My dad looks bored. St Paul's Cathedral looks like a giant Tunnock's Tea Cake. It's bigger than the church and the chapel put together and Granny Mac nods approvingly. It's full of hats.

'Oh look at the state of her,' says my mum, pointing.

Auntie Louisa and Granny Mac tut as one. Even my dad sits up a bit.

'That Maggie's dressed fer a funeral. Black, at a weddin'.'

Me and my mum have a strict telly diet of hot sweet tea, a Tunnock's Tea Cake or two, salt and vinegar crisps and *Hart to Hart*. Like all Americans, Mr and Mrs Hart look rich. Every week they fight crime with big hair and wall-to-wall teeth even whiter than my dad's falsers. The Harts speed along seaside roads in a wee red car that my dad knows the name of and never mess a hair on their heads. They're always at glittering parties where sparkling drinks are brought in tall glasses on silver trays by black men. Ahmed, whose parents own the Paki shop, is the closest thing to black round here.

Mr Hart is always polite, even to the black men, and flame-haired Mrs Hart has a flirty smile for everybody. They even have a servant: Max. Mr Hart made all his millions himself, which makes them even better. Mrs Hart is a fiery redhead journalist. Max says she's 'goy-jus'. She is. Right there and then I decide to be a journalist when I grow up: solving mysteries, meeting famous people and occasionally tapping at a typewriter before walking into the sunset laughing with my own Mr Hart.

My mum wants to be Mrs Hart and I do too but she can't grow her hair out because it goes too curly. 'At least mine's natural,' she says. That's how my dad knew she was a Catholic. She was leaving school with no O levels and he was already working at the Craig. 'He was that handsome, yer daddy,' she says. 'Handsome than Mr Hart. Still is. But yer Granny Mac was not happy and neither was yer Granny Barr.' She looks at the rings on her fingers.

'Jet-setters,' says my mum wistfully, carefully unwrapping a Tea Cake so she doesn't dent or crack the perfect chocolate dome beneath. 'Money folk.'

It's 1981. No one in my family has been on a plane. My mum went to 'that Belgium' for Kitty Smith's wedding to a Flemish man called Pieter. She went on a train and a ferry 'without yer daddy' and ate '*moules* – "worse than whelks"' and laughed at a statue of a wee boy peeing and bought an ornament of an old man selling balloons which I've got to mind when I am playing. None of the rest of us has been further than Glasgow.

In every episode Mr and Mrs Hart solve thefts and murders which Max pronounces 'moy-duh'. Often the corpse or culprit is sniffed out by Freeway the dog. He's called Freeway

because the Harts rescued him from the roadside. I fantasise about finding a puppy beside the road that goes from Motherwell to Glasgow, where my dad took us to see the Christmas lights in George Square. 'M8' doesn't sound quite as good. Anyway, the doctor says I'm allergic to cats and dogs.

My wee mum is getting bigger like she's been at the Tunnock's. My dad kids on that he can't lift her and she shoos him away.

'Not long now, son,' she says, patting her belly and looking at the pram.

Our neighbours on one side are the Browns. Mr and Mrs Brown have had white hair for ever and a grown-up son called William with hair so thick and black you can't see his scalp. I spend hours at my bedroom window staring down at the top of his head while he lies out on the one sunny day that year. All three of them go out to work every day. I never see them mow their lawn but it's never any longer than my pinkie. A hedge of yellow roses grows round it and this summer I pushed my hand through the fence and nicked some to mix with water to make 'perfume'. My mum said it smelled lovely.

'Stunning whites.' My mum envies Mrs Brown's brand-new automatic washing machine. 'Her twin-tub's gone the journey,' she says, crossing herself.

On the other side are the Connors, all eight of them bursting out a three-bedroomed house the same as ours. 'You'd think the Council would move them up,' says my mum. She'd hate it if they flitted, no more mid-morning cuppa with Leena ('only the priest calls me Coleen').

My dad would love them to be anywhere but next door. Leena and Gerry don't work, they're probably too busy

looking after Bernadette, Mary, Brendan, Sean, Aileen and Danny. 'Bloody Catholics,' my dad says and his bloody Catholic wife jumps up to clout him. That's his last word on religion.

Danny is only about my age but Bernadette, the oldest, is already at Taylor High School. She's got a turn in her eye so you never know where she's looking. Our back garden has a green for drying washing and a pebble-dashed concrete shed same as everybody else's in the Gas Scheme. Ardgour Place is part of the Gas Scheme, which means we've got central heating. We don't have a chimney, not like the Coal Scheme where Granny Mac stays. She doesn't trust gas, says it's a dry heat and pats her chest.

The Connors have paved their back garden and turned it into a zoo. They've not got dogs or cats. Everything is exotic. There is: a hutch full of wriggling biting ferrets which Brendan and Sean take out every Sunday after church to put down rabbit holes in the fields by the burn. A tame magpie called Maggie living in a big old wardrobe – if she likes you she lets you tickle her ear-tufts, if she doesn't she'll go for your eyes. Once she got out and dive-bombed Mrs Brown and her white hair was streaked red. That was the end of Maggie. 'She flew away,' said my mum, waving at the sky.

The Connors' shed has been extended into an aviary full of canaries which sing and sing till you think they'll burst. They hop spastically from perch to perch stopping every now and then to peck tiny perfectly round golden seeds. Danny shows me how to carefully blow the husks off the top so they can get to the good stuff. I want my own canary more than anything in the world and I usually get what I want. 'You'll spoil the laddie,' my dad warns, but he never says no. He

bought me a rocking horse after he won on the Grand National. I plead and beg and they both make a show of saying no until one day Charlie appears in our living room in a golden cage all of his own. He's made of sunshine and songs. At night we put a tea towel over him so he goes to sleep.

Danny is a few months older than me and can do no wrong. He is my best friend in the whole world. His eyes are the green of the barley in the fields behind Granny Mac's house before they cut it and burn the stumps. He's magic with animals. He shows me not to be scared of the ferrets – to hold them tight to stop them biting. I let him play with my toys because his are all hand-me-downs and I don't mind if he bashes up my Tonka, I don't really bother with it anyway.

We've not started primary school yet. When we do we'll be separated. He'll go to St Theresa's, which is for the Catholics, and I'll go across the road to the 'non-denominational' Keir Hardie Memorial Primary with everybody else. My dad's Protestant and my mum's Catholic. I am neither. Or both. I can't work it out. For now we go to the same playschool every afternoon. In the Wendy house we act out bits from our favourite programmes – *Hart to Hart*, *CHiPs* and *Battlestar Galactica*. He never wants to be Mrs Hart but he does plant a kiss on my cheek at the end of every episode. I always start our games and I make sure it's just us in the Wendy house.

After playschool we all file out two-by-two holding hands to meet our mums at the gates where they wait smoking and gossiping. It's 3 p.m. but it's November so it's already dark and cold. There's Danny's mum but where's mine?

'Don't worry, son,' says Leena, seeing panic skitter across my face. 'Yer mammy's all right. She's in the hospital.'

Hospital! My lip starts to go. ‘She’s havin’ the wean! Yer wee sister! Yer daddy’s there an’ all! She went in this mornin’.’

Leena puts her hand out and I notice her fingernails are chewed even shorter than my mum’s. Danny takes one hand and I take the other and we walk back to 25 Ardgour Place. Wee sister, eh?

Danny and I sit end to end in our bath and we get away with splashing more than usual. Leena sits smoking on the toilet pan with the pink tasselled lid down flicking ash into the sink. Having only two weans to watch is a holiday for her – Gerry is next door with all the rest of hers. She jammies us up then makes us our tea . . . a treat I’ve dreamed of: Chicken and Mushroom Pot Noodle. We’re even allowed to rip open the sachets of soya sauce and squirt them in ourselves. Just when we think it can’t get any better we’re told we’re allowed to stay up because it’s a Special Night.

Hart to Hart flies by and we all guess who did it. Then it’s the News.

‘Poor bastards,’ says Leena, shaking her head. Danny doesn’t flinch at the bad word and neither does she. ‘Ah know they’re English but . . .’

Gerry and Leena shout at each other all the time, we hear them through the walls, but ‘bastard’ has never been used in this house, not that I’ve heard. ‘Let the poor bastards make a livin’. Under the ground, who wants to go under the ground every day? She’ll no rest till they’ve no jobs, not wan. No wonder they’re gonnae strike.’

Danny and I sip hot sweet tea and wish for the News to finish.

‘Fuckin’ witch! God forgive me, but ah hope she burns in hell, so she does.’

She doesn't look too scary, this blonde smiling woman they all hate. Whenever she comes on my dad turns it over: 'No coal, no steel, son. No coal, no steel.'

Next it's a programme I'm not even allowed to watch with my mum. It's eight o'clock – maybe even nine! The music for *Tales of the Unexpected* sounds like an ice-cream van slowed right down. It makes me feel funny. Skulls and puppets and playing cards birl round and round. It's like when my mum took me on the waltzers at the shows spinning round and round and the goldfish I won flew out the plastic bag of water and we had to watch it flipping slower and slower as we went round and round faster and faster. It stopped before we did. Once I sneaked out of bed and sat halfway down the stairs and watched this programme start through a crack in the living-room door before my dad caught me and carried me up. Now I am sitting in the living room watching it. If this is what happens when my mum has a baby I want a family as big as Danny's.

Flashes of lightning split the sky revealing a graveyard. The camera pans down across a headstone then goes below the ground through soil and tree roots then down into a coffin. Is there a body? A skeleton? Danny and I watch through our fingers pretending to be more scared than we are. Light flashes inside the coffin as a match is struck and I wonder why a dead person would smoke. It's a young blonde girl. Her face fills the telly as she realises where she is. The walls of the coffin are glass and she can see through them and she screams! And we scream too! And Leena decides 'Enough is enough' and leads us up to bed so we leave the girl in the glass coffin for ever.

I am in my *Battle of the Planets* pants and Danny is in his *Buck Rogers* pants. We're both in white vests, simmets, my dad calls them.

‘Don’t be telling yer mother I let you watch that,’ says Leena, tucking us in. She bribes us with a bag of salt and vinegar crisps from behind her back. ‘Share nice,’ she says, clicking off the light and heading back to the telly.

Danny pops the bag and we take turns tingling a crisp on our tongues. The Gas Scheme heating is on but I kid on I’m cold and snuggle in to Danny who puts his arm round me. Something hard pokes me. My pants start to feel tight so I slide them off, kicking them down my legs and over my toes. Danny does the same. The bed squeaks. I roll over to face him. This feels much warmer. We rub against each other, ignoring the crisp crumbs crunching under our legs. Danny rolls on top of me and we keep rubbing. This is new and good and we’re out of breath but giggling. I pop another crisp in my mouth.

On snaps the light!

The squeaking and giggling have given us away. Leena starts to say something and I sit up knowing I’ve done something wrong. But what? I try saying sorry but I can’t. I’m scared but it’s not that stopping me. It’s the crisp. The salt and vinegar crisp that is completely blocking my gullet. Jumping on the bed, totally pant-less, I tilt my head back and point at my mouth like a mad mime. My eyes are popping as I jump up and down.

Scared and trampled, Danny shouts, ‘FUCK!’

Leena’s face goes from angry to annoyed to afraid in a second as she pounces forward and picks me up. With one hand she crushes me to her chest – flat like my mum’s – prising my mouth open with the other.

‘Hold still,’ she says.

I wriggle like a ferret. The crisp will not go down. I cannot cough it up. My eyes widen as she pushes her fingers in my

mouth. ‘CRK!’ echoes in my head as she pokes through. Air whooshes into me. Carefully she lays me back on the bed.

Danny is already pretending he wasn’t crying. Without being asked, we both put our pants back on (me in his, him in mine). Leena takes us back downstairs where she can watch us and the telly. The News is on again and it’s the strikes and riots down south again. We take an armpit each.

‘The pair of yous,’ says Leena, looking down at us anxiously but not unkindly. ‘Ah don’t know. Yees are murder.’

‘You mean moy-duh,’ I say.

And we all laugh together like the Harts.

In the morning I wake late and Danny’s already up cos the bed is empty. It really is a bit cold now so I jammy up and head downstairs. The clock says it’s past lunchtime. Leena is drinking tea in the scullery with my dad who is usually sleeping or at work now.

‘Where’s ma mum?’ I ask, looking round like she might be in one of the cupboards.

‘Shhh, she’s in bed, son,’ says Leena, winking, and we wordlessly turn all of last night into a secret.

My dad picks me up and carries me over to the pram and we look down into it. There’s a funny kind of basket in there and inside that there’s a tiny bundle of pink wool with a face and masses of curly white-blond hair.

‘That’s yer wee sister,’ he says. ‘Christine.’

‘She’s teenie!’ I say, amazed by her smallness. And I love her.