

ANNIE'S BOY

GARY TODD



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Thanks to Mary Anne Radmacher for her poem beginning ‘Courage doesn’t always roar’ and it is used with permission from the author, whose work can be found through appliedinsight.net.

To my friend Gary Stretch who is a born fighter, a champion in life and an inspiration.

To my wife, Jenny who has always been there with me. Love you to my heart.

For our children, John, Erin and Hannah. Always be yourself and be kind in life. Be happy. Go with your gut and never doubt yourself.

This is for the families of the 1970s and ‘80s who endured and who all have their own stories to tell.

Thanks to New Holland Publishers for believing in our story.

This is for all the children who dream. Never stop believing in yourself.

A special mention for my pal Bobby, who sat with me every night as I locked myself away. As he wagged his tail staring at me, wondering what the hell I was doing.

Alan ‘Stoney’ Stone. Rest in peace.

'Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying I will try again tomorrow.'

This book is dedicated to our mum
Annie Murphy
1929-2011

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SYDNEY, 2011

It was an ordinary morning for me, and I was doing what I had always done since I was a young boy, trying my best to punch holes in whatever heavy bag was waiting for me.

My hands weren't what they once were and years and decades of self-inflicted gym punishment, combined with long hours building underground tunnels, had taken their toll.

I hammered the bag as hard as I could, nonetheless. As I moved, the sweat followed me, and the old wooden floorboards looked like someone had taken to them with a watering can.

I knew I had only a few seconds to go for another three minutes to be over and I could see from the corner of my eye that the old guy in the gym was waving at me to get my attention.

As I finished, the old 'pug' stood in the doorway to his office-come-storeroom and he shouted 'Gary, it's for you.'

As I walked towards him, I pulled on the velcro strap and removed my glove. 'Thanks Igor. Who is it?' I took the phone before the old man could answer, and I said, 'Hello.'

I pressed the cold glass to my ear, trying to block out the noise of

the gym. 'Hello ...' I pressed the phone harder into my ear as I was given the news I never wanted to hear, but always knew I would.

I looked down and a river of sweat flowed down my nose, making a puddle on the floor as I squeezed the life out of the phone. There were no questions, no banter, and no answers to be had. All I could say was, 'Thanks for letting me know,' and I walked away to the corner of the gym.

Leaving the gym, as I walked, the wind and the rain pushed and blasted my face, but I didn't feel it. I reached the edge of the rugged Sydney coastline, and I was numb inside.

It was a grey day as the wind and the swell from the crashing waves battered the ancient rocks. I stood on the edge, looking out to sea and all I could do was throw a small bunch of white roses into the wind, watching them go up and away into the sky and down into the rolling tide of the Pacific Ocean. My mind was a million miles away, but my heart was with my mum in Dundee.

As I looked out into oblivion, the memories came flooding back as powerful as the sea below.

THE ROADS AND THE MILES 'FAE' ST MARY'S TO HELL DUNDEE 1969

The nursery was busy with children bouncing about as if they were made of rubber, and in between taking turns on the rusty old swing, they were happy kneeling in the mud, making sandcastles and then destroying each other's magic kingdoms with copious amounts of water or one single back hander to end proceedings. Me, I had somehow managed to get my knee caught in the railings of a steel fence. I was four years old, and this was my first memory. It was the first of many tight spots to come. When I couldn't get my knee out, I shouted on the teacher and as it started to swell up, she ran off and called my mum's work. The children stopped running riot and gathered around the fence, and in between sucking their thumbs and asking me if I was going to die or was someone coming to cut my leg off, I stood there like a numpty wishing my mum was there. I remember hearing my mum's voice

before I could see her, and as she came bolting through the door, I was relieved she was there.

'Gary, how the hell did you manage that?' I shrugged my shoulders and made a funny face as if to say I didn't know.

At that point, two firemen crossed the worn grass towards me carrying axes. My mum was having none of it and said, 'What the hell is going on here?' and she walked towards the young nursery teacher saying, 'Get me some lard or butter and I'll get my boy's leg out.' The teacher returned with a tub and my mum smeared the butter all over my leg and the black fence posts.

'Right you, wiggle yer knee about and try and pull your leg out.' By this time I was looking at everyone watching me and my knee was like a balloon. I was scared. 'Gary, if you don't pull it out, the firemen will have to cut ...'

As soon as I heard the word cut, I pulled out as hard as I could, and I fell over onto the grass. There was a round of applause from the firemen and the teachers, as Mum rubbed my knee with her hands. The children ran off as I jumped to my feet. 'Are you okay?' When I said I was, she slapped me over the back of my head, saying, 'Wait till I get you home. I've had to get away from work and I won't get paid. Get your coat and bag.'

As we left, I remember waving cheerio to the teachers and as we both pushed on the heavy fire doors of the nursery, the cold air washing the back of my neck as the rain started to fall. My mum took my hand and we walked up the road to catch the bus. 'Mum, can we get a bag of chips before we get on the bus?'

Mum looked at me with a serious face then said, 'You will drive me to drink. C'mon then but I'm getting the crispy one's this time.'

We lived in a small, two-bedroom council tenement in one of Dundee's many housing schemes. There were six families crammed into the block and we lived on the top floor. I shared the bedroom

with my mum, and my sister Pat had the other bedroom as she was eleven years older than me. The decor was sparse with basic furniture and no room for any luxuries, but it was as homely as it could be. Mum worked in a factory for years and she would sit at a bench all day using tweezers to put together bits and bobs that would make watches tick. At night she would go and work as a barmaid with my auntie Cath. There were always money worries and whatever Mum did and however hard she worked, it seemed like it was never enough.

I would hear my mum and sister argue as I watched *The Magic Roundabout* on the TV.

'Pat, I have been offered work tonight in the pub and I need you to look after Gary.'

'Ach Mum, I can't do it. I'm going out with my pals, and I've been saving up for it. You can't keep expecting me to look after Gary. It's not fair Mum.'

My mum would reply, 'Life isn't fair Pat. Do you think I want to work all day and go and work at night in that pub? We are struggling and I need to work, and the tenement factor is on me every week for being behind with the rent, and Cath needs me so you're doing it.'

I remember Pat running off crying and staying in her bedroom until Mum was leaving.

My sister looked after me a lot when my mum was working and I have great memories of going into the town with her. She would take my hand and we would walk down to the arcade and she would let me ride on a mechanical rocking horse called Champion, the Wonder Horse.

Mum would cook our dinner in a tiny kitchen that had one small window at the end of the wall, and as she was making our mashed 'tatties', sausages and baked beans, she would take the last draw from her cigarette, stub it out in one of the ashtrays that were

strategically planted around the council flat and take a final swig to finish her cup of tea. Before leaving she would always say the same things to Pat. 'Pat, wash the dishes. I have done the pots, and make sure he brushes his teeth and gets to bed at nine. Check the electricity is off and the plugs are cool. I'll be off now, and I'll see you in the morning.'

And with that, my mum was off down the stairs for another shift in the pub. I would watch the TV or play with my toy soldiers, and I would do anything not to go to bed at nine. Pat would go along with it until I eventually fell asleep or was pretending to be asleep on the carpet. I noticed she always covered me up with a blanket as I listened to the TV in the background. Pat would rub my cheek and say, 'It's time for bed. C'mon. Mum said nine o'clock and it's past that so hurry up.'

I would brush my teeth, splash cold water on my face and run through to my mum's bed to get my 'jamas' on. I would bounce about trying to get warm then jump into a freezing cold bed and wriggle about until the bed's chill was gone. I would shout on Pat, 'When is Mum coming home?'

'Soon, get to sleep.'

'Pat, leave the light on. I need to find my Davy Crockett gun. I can't sleep without it.'

'Gary, it's under Mum's pillow. Get to sleep.'

'Pat, do you think we will ever get a dog?'

'No! Good night.'

Pat would always appear at the bedroom door and say, 'Are you warm enough?' and I would nod even if I wasn't. My sister would turn the ceiling light off and darkness filled the room.

I listened for the key turning in the front door and waited for a few minutes to hear Mum rustle about in the living room. Each time, I was happy she was home. I crept through one night and as I

hid behind the open living room door, I watched Mum sitting down on her chair. As she took off her flat shoes and gently rubbed her feet, I saw that they were badly swollen. She sat on the chair and sighed a big sigh, letting her head fall backwards, falling asleep for a few seconds before jumping up as if she was in a bad dream. She then looked down and began to pray.

'Please God, give me the strength I need to look after us. I'm tired and I want a better life. Look after him. He wasn't meant for this world as he is special so please look after him.'

Mum moved and I turned around and walked quietly along the dark lobby and into our bedroom, crawling across the divan bed and into the warm patch of the sheets I had left a few minutes earlier. I fell asleep wondering who it was that was special.

The next morning I was awakened by the same noise as always. It was Mum coughing up black-coloured phlegm and as her body strained, she clung to the toilet seat, wrenching into the white bowl of filth. Once she got it all up, she would go to the kitchen and have a cup of tea then have a smoke to kickstart a new day. My sister used to tell her off, 'Mum, you need to give them up. It's not good for you to be coughing like that every day, and it's a horrible habit.'

Mum always gave the same answer back, 'Ach, shoosh you, I enjoy it.'

Mum put out breakfast, which was cornflakes and milk, and she would give instructions to Pat. 'Pat, Mabel said she can take Gary to school so you can drop him off at her house. Make sure everything is off, and I'll see you tonight.'

I would follow her to the door, and watch her grip the wooden banister while negotiating the steep concrete stairs. She always stopped halfway down and waved or blew me a kiss then she would be gone. I would go back inside and put my clothes on while eating my cornflakes as fast as I could as we were always in a rush.

Pat would drop me off at Mabel Scott's house which was one floor down and she would then run for her bus.

Mabel was a nice lady, and a good, kind-hearted person. I loved going to her house as it was always warm, and she always gave me a biscuit and a drink of milk before we walked to school.

Mabel would have the children huddled together as we made our way through the streets and as we went, more children would tag along until we reached the school gates, then the bell would ring, and we would run as fast as we could to get inside to get our spot on the bench. We ripped our coats and woolly hats off and then sat and waited for the teacher to give us the signal to go and get our free bottle of milk, which was sitting there waiting for us in a blue crate in the corner. I can still remember the excitement of sticking your plastic straw through the bottle top and tasting the milk and the cream that was sitting just under the tin-foil cap.

The classroom was warm as the orange-red colours of the three-bar fire lit up our faces with rosy cheeks as we learned to draw and colour in and the smells of glue, paint and disinfectant bounced off every wall. It was a safe and happy place to be.

We walked home and played in the street until our dinner was ready. Twice a week, our street had a visitor and we always knew well in advance as a bell would ring and we would all stop and shout, 'It's the rag'n'bone man!'

The rag'n'bone man drove from scheme to scheme, collecting anything he could, which was usually old rags, and he handed out balloons to the children with his yellow nicotine fingers. He would then sell the rags to the factories and that would get him enough money for the bookies and the drink.

We would wait at the top of the street and watch for his old van driving slowly towards us and wave and cheer until he jumped out.

'Hello children, what have you got for me today? Remember, the more you have the better the prize.'

Thinking back, no-one ever had much of anything for him, but he still gave us a few balloons and a smile and a wave until next time.

The streets outside the tenements were always alive with the sound of children laughing and shouting. There were children toy fighting, wrestling in the mud and whatever was left of the unkempt grass, small girls were sitting on the steps nursing their dolls and trying to force-feed plastic bottles with imaginary milk into vacant-looking plastic faces, and there were boys pretending to drive a stripped down, skeleton of an old car that had been sitting in the front garden collecting rust and used crisp packets, other boys were bouncing their ball on the side of the kerb, hoping the ball bounced back to them.

I was just about to take my shot at the kerb, when I heard, 'Fight, fight, there's a fight in the 'backies!'

The children all stopped and looked at each other and shouted 'Fight! C'mon!' As we ran, we followed the older boys into the 'closie' of the tenement, and our shouting echoed through the old building until we got down the stairs and into the back garden. As I ran, I had to find my way through the sheets that were hanging and blowing around in the wind and it was then I saw my mum thrashing about with another woman. My mum punched the woman and she fell to the ground, and I watched as they both grabbed each other's hair, wrapping the hair around their fingers, trying to pull out the strands then go for more. They were like two crocodiles in a death roll. I could hear Mum snarl, 'Let go of my fucking hair!'

'Fuck off you cow, I'm not letting go!'

'I can stay here all day so let go of my hair and I'll let you up.'

After a while, the woman untangled Mum's hair from her fingers

and Mum jumped to her feet. A man helped the other woman to her feet and I could see that there was blood coming out of her nose and running down her neck and the woman's hair was a mess. Mum had blood seeping through her scalp where her hair had been pulled out in clumps. The woman was shaking, and she was dabbing her nose with her sleeve as she spoke to the man. 'She is fucking mental!'

My mum replied, 'You took my washing line and I have warned you before about using it without asking!'

As the man gently put his hand on the woman's shoulder, the woman said, 'Shut yer puss nobody tells me ...'

Before the woman could say another word, Mum punched her already bloodied nose and the woman staggered backwards, falling to the ground. My mum then turned and walked off towards the steps, pausing and turning around to me, saying, 'Son, dinner will be ready soon. Go and play.'

I looked at my mum, and the children all looked at me as they ran through the closie, and we all went back to being children in the street again.

The grass and the dirt had turned to mud as the rain had been blowing through off and on and there was no escaping it. Bath night was usually on a Sunday, but I was filthy, and the mud was caked in. 'Gary, get those clothes off. Your dinner is ready so hurry up and you will need to get a bath tonight.'

As I sat down at our foldaway table at the kitchen door, I ate my dinner, and watched my mum cleaning. She was dusting and vacuuming while smoking a cigarette, and every now and then, she would take a swig of Carlsberg special brew. There was Irish fiddle music playing on a tape recorder that was propped up on the windowsill.

'C'mon Gary, let's get you in the bath.'

Mum would boil a pot of water on the stove and carry the scalding hot water through to a big rusty sink until it was at the right level then she would top it up with cold water and test the water with her elbow. I watched TV until Mum shouted on me then I climbed onto a small step ladder to jump in. Mum would bring a smaller pot and she would rub soapy liquid on my head, and with bubbles everywhere we would laugh and giggle as she poured the pot of water over my head and shoulders. 'Hey you, you're soaking the place and me. I think you're getting too big for the sink.'

'Mum, next week, can I go in the bath then?'

'Mibbe, we'll see son. C'mon, let's get you out. Watch you don't slip.'

She wrapped me in a big towel and cuddled me. 'Ohhhh ... does that feel good, my boy? Let's get your jamas on and you can watch the TV and I'll make you a bit of toast.'

I can't remember, ever feeling so safe. My mum never said the word love, but I always felt love.

One morning, I woke up with a sore stomach. I couldn't go to the toilet and it was painful. I sat on that cold toilet seat with legs dangling and nothing was budging. I told my mum, and she gave me two big spoonfuls of warm cod-liver oil for my troubles. I tried to resist, but Mum said if I didn't take the medicine and I couldn't get a number two then we would have to go to the infirmary. I forced the spoons down while gagging on the putrid liquid.

After all that, there was still no movement, so my mum called a doctor out. The doctor arrived and Mum explained my predicament. There was plenty of nodding from the doctor and he then opened his bag of goodies, revealing a multitude of shiny metal instruments, and a bag of boiled sweeties, and as he asked

me to undo the buttons of my pyjamas, he listened to my heartbeat and with more nodding of his head and raising his eyebrows, he told my mum he would need to take me into the toilet. We walked into the small toilet and he said, 'Son, take down your pants as I need to have a look at your bottom.' I was nervous but I knew my mum was outside the toilet, so I did what he said. 'Son, I need you to bend over and don't move.'

As I stood there, bent in half, I was nervous at the thought of what was coming next and then I felt this pain in my hole and I screamed. 'Mum! Mum!'

The man grabbed me tight and said, 'It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you.'

At that point, Mum pushed open the door, and as I looked at her, she said, 'What the fuck are you doing to my boy? Did you stick that pencil up his arse, you fucking bastard? I pushed myself away from the man as my mum jumped on him and she began punching him anywhere she could. 'I'll fucking kill you.'

The doctor staggered out of the toilet and Mum jumped on his back. He stood up straight and put his hands up in defence, saying he was calling the police. 'Get to fuck out my house now. I'm reporting you!'

The man grabbed his bag of tools and left.

'Are you alright son. I'm sorry.'

I told Mum I was okay and as I spoke to her I ate the sweetie I got from the man who stuck the pencil up my arse. After a few hours, the cod-liver oil worked, and we carried on.

It was a Friday night, and my sister was out with her friends. There was no school the next day, so Mum always let me stay up and watch TV. In Scotland, there was a program that used to come on

just before the end of the transmission. It was either *Late Call* or *Reflections* and it was always the same. A minister or a priest would sit in a big chair and there would always be a small table and a lamp to give the setting some ambience. The idea was the priest would tell a story about Jesus and his pals and he would somehow relay his story out to whoever was listening, and try and give comfort to the old people, or people living alone. I enjoyed listening to the stories and looking at the funny clothes they wore. 'Look Mum, he's got a funny hat on tonight.'

My mum would say, 'C'mon you, it's time for bed. I'm away to get changed for bed and when I get back, the TV is going off.'

'Okay Mum, he's nearly finished his story.'

As Mum walked into the living room, the priest had finished, and as he crossed his legs, the lights of the studio were dimmed and he would disappear. 'Right you, bed!' I jumped up and helped Mum turn off the wall switches, as she went around checking the plugs weren't hot. Mum was always scared there would be a fire and we would lose whatever it was we had. She stood at the living room door and scanned the room one more time as I jumped across our bed and looked for my Davy Crockett gun. 'Mum, where is my gun? I can't sleep without it.'

Mum checked that the front door had the chain on it, and said, 'Your gun will be there. Try under my pillow.'

It was there, and I gripped it as Mum sat on her side of the bed.

Suddenly there was a loud banging noise and just as Mum jumped up there was a screeching, splintering noise I had never heard before. As I looked at Mum, I saw the door being broken down. Mum leapt forward and I fell backwards out of the bed, jamming myself into the cold, damp wall behind, watching in fear of what was to come. Mum was pushed back onto the bed like a rag doll being tossed out of a pram and it was then I saw him. I was

confused, and as he came through the front door into our bedroom confusion turned to absolute terror as he raised a long butcher's knife up while grabbing Mum by her nightgown and holding the knife to her throat. 'I'm gonna fucking kill you!' he said, as he bashed my mum against the wall.

I knew this man. It was my dad. As he held the knife, he moved, and I could see the crazed look in his eyes, his Brylcreemed slap-back hair was falling forward in strands, sweat sticking to his white shirt. I pressed my back into the wall and as I held up my gun, my hand was shaking. I could do nothing but point the plastic gun at him and say, 'Leave us alone. Leave my mum alone.'

My dad looked at me while shaking Mum and, in a flash, he was out through the hole in the door. Mum fell on the floor crying, and then she crawled onto the bed, and I jumped up and cuddled her as she stared at the broken door.

There were splinters of wood on the carpet and a light appeared from the landing, Mabel shouting up, 'Annie, are you okay? Do you want me to call the police?'

Mum pulled the broken frame of the door open and reached for the banister. 'Mabel, we are okay, we'll be fine. Thanks.'

She came inside, and I was shivering on the bed. Mum told me to get dressed. She packed two bags and called a taxi and we turned off the lights and walked hand in hand down the steps. It was dark, as there was only one light working and the others were flickering and buzzing.

Mabel opened her door and said, 'Are you sure you'll be alright now?'

'Mabel, thanks, we'll be fine. We are going to stay with Elen for a while.'

Mabel hugged Mum and smiled at me, and she left her front door open to give us light until we reached the bottom of the close.

The skies opened up as we waited inside the dark, damp space, and as we looked out for the taxi's light, I watched the drips of water from the rain meet and run along the small roof slab making a hundred tiny droplets splashing at our feet. The taxi approached and we made a run for it through the puddles that had collected in the worn-out divots of asphalt on the footpath to the main road.

'C'mon jump in, cold tonight. Where are we off to?' the taxi driver asked and Mum replied, 'Fintry, Findale Street, I'll show you where when we get there.'

As we sat in the taxi, I looked out the window and the streets were empty as the rain hammered down. Mum was speechless, and she had a blank look in her eyes as she stared out the taxi's front window. As I looked at her, I thought about what had happened and wondered, why? I closed my eyes and thought about tomorrow.

The next morning, I woke up in a bed and, as I rubbed my eyes, I saw two feet and a pair of woolly, discoloured socks on the pillow. I couldn't remember going to bed but I knew I was at my cousin's when I saw those feet, and I was happy. It was always a noisy but happy house and there were always children running around. Whenever I visited them, it was like going on holiday without the postcards. We played in the street and there was a big old tree that had a thick rope hanging from the highest branch and children would jump on and hang on for dear life as it took them out and across the flowing burn at the bottom of the hill. When it rained, we got soaked and watched *Laurel and Hardy*, *Flash Gordon*, *The Arabian Knights* and *The Banana Splits* on the TV, and we would have fish fingers, chips and beans every night. I shared the bed and had feet in my face, but I loved it there. I would stay with my cousins and Mum would go back to work and do what she had to do for us. I can remember being told that my mum was coming to get me soon

and although I loved being with my cousins, I was also excited and relieved to be with Mum again.

As we left my cousins', Mum told me she had a surprise for me. I pestered her to tell me what it was, but she wouldn't let on. We swung around the corner off the main road and along a short, narrow street. I looked up at the sign saying 'St Fillans Terrace' and as we got out of the taxi, I saw a big van and two men in blue boilersuits carrying furniture through a rusty gate. 'Gary, do you like our new place?'

'Mum, it's great! Is this our own garden?'

'Yes, it's ours. Do you want to see the surprise?'

'Yes, what is it?'

Mum walked in front and as she stepped through the front door, she paused for a second and moved to the side of the wall to let me inside. All I could see were wooden flat boards across the floor and splashes of fresh paint on clear plastic sheets. There was a smell of timber and paint in the air.

'C'mon son, up here.'

Mum took me by the shoulder as she led me up the bare boards of the stair and landing and she said, 'Close your eyes.'

We shuffled forward and then she said, 'Open your eyes.' I stood there, confused, as I didn't know what I was looking at. It was an empty room with four walls and no carpet and no curtains. As my mum walked to the middle of the room, she said, 'It's your bedroom son. We will do it up and I've took on new carpets and you're getting your own bed as well.'

I was six years old, and I had never known anything other than sharing a bed with my mum. 'How can I not stay with you Mum? I don't want my own room or bed. I like sleeping in your bed!'

Mum replied, 'Gary, this is a new start for us. We don't need to share the bed anymore. Just wait until you see your new bed and

we get your room all done up, it will be great. C'mon, let's see the garden.'

Mum walked down the stairs and I followed her outside, dodging the two men coming through the front door.

The garden area to the side of the house wasn't grassed, nor did it have any flowers bursting with colour. It was a patch of council land that was a jungle of grey and brown bushes with spiky nettles. I loved it and my imagination took over and ran as wild as the weeds in the ground. As the men finished and laid down the last box, Mum handed them a can of lager each and the corned beef sandwiches she had made them. I watched them scoff them down as they gathered their hessian cloth sheets before leaving.

Mum had two pies in the oven and as we waited on them heating up, we unpacked some boxes of ornaments and ashtrays. There were small toby jugs that had faces of old pirates from through the years that my mum had collected and meticulously arranged around our new living room. There was an armchair and a matching settee that sat alongside the big window that looked out to the street and a full view of the washing lines of the run-down tenements across the 'backies'. Mum had 'taken on' a new wooden mantelpiece that sat against the wall next to the TV, and a two-bar fire that lit up with an orange glow giving the illusion that there were burning hot coals smouldering within the metal frame.

I remember Mum telling my sister that she took on a lot of 'tick' buying new carpets and furniture as this was going to be new stuff for a new start for us and she would pay it off in a few years' time.

We sat at the front door, ate our pies and threw flaky crumbs to the birds as they pecked, hopped, and swallowed, then flew off.

That night, it was the strangest feeling. As I lay in my own bed, in my own room, a feeling of panic started to overwhelm me. I knew my mum was right next door and as I looked around, it was like

I was lying in this huge box. Then, just when I needed her, she appeared. 'C'mon you, get to sleep. Move over and let me in and no farting.'

As she tickled me, we both laughed, and I can't remember falling asleep.

The next day we went for a walk to find the shops and Mum stopped to talk to the women in the street. Each time we stopped I would listen to the conversations. Some of the women had children hanging off them and there were girls and boys standing staring at me, saying nothing. As I stood there wishing Mum would stop talking, I was fixated on a small boy who had his arm wrapped around his mum's leg, clinging to her. He looked bald but wasn't and he had a big, egg-shaped bump on his head and a crusty, runny nose that was dribbling into his mouth. As he stared at me, he screwed up his old-man face and lapped up the 'snotters' with the tip of his tongue.

Although I had already heard the story, my mum said, 'That woman's other wee boy cannie get the toilet. Two weeks now. I told his mum she should get up to the doctors. That's no good. See Gary, cod-liver oil and prunes keep you regular son.'

I looked up at Mum and said 'Yeah Mum. If there is a chipper, can we get a bag o' chips?'

'Let's see what's there and we'll see when we get there.'

As we walked along the streets, I noticed there were houses with wooden boards covering the windows, and there were old, rusted cars sitting in front gardens, with missing wheels and axles, propped up on bricks, and windows smashed in and black plastic taped around the doors. There was the noise of dogs barking, and they had been and gone and had left shite everywhere along the footpaths, and rubbish and sweetie papers were swirling and blowing in the wind as we reached the shops.

There was a chipper, and we did share a bag of chips. As we walked up the hill, we counted the number of boards on the windows and, miraculously, we avoided stepping in dog shit.

When we got home, Mum vacuumed the newly laid carpet and I played in the garden with my toy soldiers. I was busy digging out a trench for my soldiers, which was going to be a river that separated the cowboys from the US marines in an epic battle later that day.

I looked along the street and saw a car coming towards the garden. I recognised the driver and dropped my digging stick and ran inside. 'Mum, we need to hide. It's him! Hurry, he'll be here in a minute.'

Mum turned off the vacuum cleaner and said, 'Gary, it's okay. I know. I know. I was going to tell you. Me and your dad are getting back together. I spoke to your dad. It's okay.'

I heard the rusty gate squeaking and then footsteps on the gravel path which led to our front door. Mum walked out of the living room and I was right behind her as she opened the door.

'Hi Bert. C'mon in ... do you want a cup o' tea?'

As he walked in, I thought back to the last time I saw him. He looked very different. He was dressed in a pair of grey pants and a black dress jacket with a white shirt. His hair was swooshed back and wet looking and he was quiet and smiling. I could see part of a white string vest poking out the top of his shirt and he smelt of Old Spice.

I remembered him thrashing my mum around and I remembered Mum's motionless body, lying on the bed as I cradled her while I held my gun, and I remembered the rage and anger in his face. It was hard not to remember and impossible to forget.

'No, not for me Annie. I thought I would drop in to see how you and Gary were doing.'

And Mum said, 'We have been fine. We're okay ... eh Gary?'

I didn't say anything. My dad looked at me and Mum and said, 'You've got the place looking fine. Is this a new carpet?'

'Yes, we've settled in, and the neighbours are great.'

As Dad sat down, he looked over at me and he looked around the living room and said, 'So how are you getting on at school?'

'It's okay. When I went back, they didn't like my hair and they said I had to get it cut.'

'Ach, don't worry about them son ... Annie, I need to get going as I have a few things to do.'

Mum looked at me as my dad stood up. He then rubbed the top of my head, and I can remember jumping and pulling back my head. 'See you son. Be good for your mum and I'll see you soon.'

I didn't answer him, and I turned around and watched the TV. My silence was my defence, and I was glad he was leaving but at the same time I wondered where he was going.

The front door closed, and Mum walked into the kitchen and turned on the tap. I stopped watching the TV and asked, 'Is he going to hit you again?'

Mum turned the tap off and said, 'No ... No he won't. He loves you and me, and everything will be fine. We will stay here, and we will go down to your dad's house on the weekends and he will pick you up if I have to work in your Auntie Cath's pub. This will be a new start for us.' Mum went back to washing the dishes and I returned to my jungle.

The rest of the afternoon, there were battles going on in my head and I decided to let the cowboys and Indians beat the marines, and the river I made eventually caved in and there were casualties and lost soldiers in the mud, and trails of shit everywhere. As the darkness closed in outside, I looked at our front door and I thought about the battles to come.

The house was eerily quiet that night and as I lay in my bed, I heard Mum praying and I listened as always.

'Please God. Keep us safe. We need a break. A new start. Life has been shite for him. Sorry for swearing. Can you look after my boy? I know I ask the same thing all the time. While I'm here God, I met a woman today and she told me her wee boy Patsy cannie get the toilet so I was wondering if you could help him go. She was really worried about him. That would be great if you could help him. Thanks, Amen.'

I drifted off thinking about my dad, and the boy that couldn't get the toilet, and his brother with the old man's face, licking his snout.