



## **“From The Back Step”**

*By Rhéa McLaughlin, Merville Community College*

“Free Derry” was a haze of red and smoke. The ground shook before a thunderous sound reached my grandmother’s ears. “No one should ever have to grow up like that; we thought that was normal”.

Back then she was often outside with her friends, skipping or playing ball against the wall, with the infectious sound of their laughter echoing through the street, while a soldier watched them suspiciously, with a machine gun slung over his shoulder, “as if we were some kind of a threat.” This scared her, of course, but after a while, it became part of the city landscape, a bit like a lamppost or a footpath, but it never went away. “We’d be outside playing, and all of a sudden a riot would break out, and we’d be rushed inside again.”

“My earliest memory comes from when I was just six years old.” It was during Operation Motorman; the largest British military operation since WWII The government decided it was time for them to ‘retake’ the no-go areas, and the Bogside was one of them. I remember sitting on the back step with my baby sister, watching the soldiers search my house. I was terrified but all I could do was watch in terror.”

School usually felt quite normal, like a breath of fresh air really from the chaos but one afternoon, coming home from school my grandmother came across something she could never forget. Three teenagers stood huddled in an alley, when the ground shook and a deafening blast left her ears ringing for days, “It was an almighty explosion.”

Internment was introduced in 1971. It was the Army’s attempt to stop the IRA. Anyone of age in the Bogside was considered guilty in their eyes. “My father, my brothers... even my sister was arrested again and again,” she told me “They were convinced we were criminals. I became used to my house being raided. The back step became a familiar spot for me, a place to watch everything happen.”

“One of my brothers ended up going to jail at only 17,” my granny continued. “He hadn’t done anything wrong; he was arrested without charge and sent away for two years.” After two years he finally got a trial and was released straight away as he had no charges to answer to.

My great-grandmother was an amazing woman- she was the epitome of 'an Irish mammy'. She looked after everyone, regardless of what side they were on. "I saw many people being killed," my granny recalled "We could not avoid it you know... My mother tried to protect me, but it was impossible. Violence was such a normal part of the day in the Bogside. But my mother always looked after people. I watched her give British soldiers their last rites on multiple occasions. "One of the scariest moments for me was when I got hit by a rubber bullet," she revealed.

Despite the chaos, she was still a teenage girl, she still did 'normal' things. "I used to sneak out to the riots," she admitted "I'd tell my parents I was going to a friend's house, and we'd all go out and see what was happening." She paused before continuing, "I regretted this the day I was shot. I got lucky, though. It hit my backside and I limped around for a few days. After that, I stayed away for a while."

What a lot of us do not consider, is how living through the Troubles shapes a person. "I saw things that no one should ever see, especially not a young girl," Granny tells me "It really affected me. I am very anxious now, and it stems from everything I went through as a child. I cannot help but worry about everything, that is just the way I learned to live. There was a constant fear, and it is something I have not been able to shake."

Talking to my grandmother has opened my eyes. I have always had a deep admiration for her, but now I have a better understanding of how hard life was for her. I realise how privileged I am to grow up these days. I will never understand the fear of turning a corner and wondering whether a riot will break out. She has always been an inspiration for me. She's never been afraid to speak her mind or to stand firm in her beliefs.

"I'm grateful we're out the other end of it now," she says "The Peace Process was an incredible thing to witness. I think the Good Friday Agreement should be the framework for the rest of the world. If we can do it, why can't everyone else?"

Her childhood was shaped by conflict; today mine is shaped by the peace she feels lucky to have lived to see and that's something I will never take for granted again.