

JAMES KELMAN

**KIERON
SMITH,
BOY**



'I have read no other depiction of the inner life of a boy that comes as close as this to *The Catcher in the Rye*' *Literary Review*

'Magnificent and important . . . might just be Kelman's greatest achievement to date' *Irvine Welsh, Financial Times*



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Kieron Smith, Boy
by
James Kelman

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In the old place the river was not far from our street. There was a park and all different things in between. The park had a great pond with paddleboats and people sailed model yachts. Ye caught fish in it too. Ye caught them with poles that had wee nets tied at the end. But most people did not have these. Ye just caught them with yer hands. Ye laid down on yer front close into the edge on the ground. Here it sloped sharp into the water, so ye did not go too close. Just yer shoulders reached that bit where the slope started. Ye rolled up yer sleeves and put yer hands together and let them go down it. Just slow, then touching the water and yer hands going in. If ye went too fast ye went right in up yer arms over yer shoulders. Ye only went a wee bit, a wee bit, a wee bit till yer hands were down as far. Then yer palms up the way, holding together. If a fish came by ye saw it and just waited till it came in close. If it just stayed there over yer hands, that was how ye were waiting. It was just looking about. What was it going to do? Oh be careful if ye do it too fast, if yer fingers just move and even it is just the totiest wee bit. Its tail whished and it was away or else it did not and stayed there, so if ye grabbed it and ye got it and it did not get away. So that was you, ye caught one.

But they were quick, ye had to do it right.

Ye were having to watch it as well how yer body went, lying on yer front, if it was wee bits at a time ye were moving. And ye did not notice till ye slid right down and the water was up yer shoulders, oh mammy. Yer hands reached the bottom and ye pressed and pressed to push yer feet back up and if a big boy caught yer feet and pulled ye out or else that was you and ye went right the way in the water. That happened to people and men had to go in and get them. Daft wee b****r.

On the bottom was all slimy mud, broken bottles and bits of glass

and bricks and nails and old stuff, everything. Prams and bike-wheels, and shoes, and then a man's bunnet. I saw that.

One time I was soaking the whole way through and my maw was completely angry, how I was going to die of pneumonia or else diphtheria if ye swallowed the water. My da was home on leave and he gived me a doing. But I liked going to the pond. The men sailed their boats there and had races, and their boats were great. Ye saw their sails and how the boat was tipping right over till it was going to capsize but it did not, it was just picking up speed because the wind was there and it was good, so they were all sailing great and the boys all shouting, and the men too. Go on Go on, Hold there.

Old men as well, if their boat was going to win the race and they shouted their names if the boat had its name and they did. All had good names, Stormy Petrel and Sea Scout. Oh hold there Sea Scout.

I telled my granda. He would have liked it, if the old men were there too, he could have went with me and they had seats, people could sit in the seats and just watch.

My Uncle Billy had a model yacht when he was a boy. He got it off somebody whose da worked in the docks. It was not a toy. Model yachts were real boats and they sailed good. It was just they were wee. If ye could have made a wish and shrunk to a Tom Thumb ye could have climbed aboard and put to sea for treasure islands. Then if ye were getting chased, ye could hide anywhere ye wanted. It would just be a thing like a cat or a dog, ye would have to be careful then, if they caught ye, and ate ye. Or if it was a mouse, they dragged ye into their hole, oh mammy.

Our old house had mice. My maw and me and Mattie were going to have breakfast and there they all were on top of the kitchen table and up on the sink and the draining board, piles of them. My maw went potty and started greeting. Me and Mattie scattered them and chased them but we could not catch them and did not know what to do. My maw was shouting in a high voice. Ohh ohhh!

We went and got my granda. He was not going to come but then he did. My grannie said it was just silly to climb up all the stairs, he

would have no breath. Aye I will. That was what he said. I am going.

He made it a laugh. It is a big safari hunt. So then he gived me a joke. How far we going son?

Safari's the kitchen granda.

Our house was three up on the top storey. My granda stopped at all the landings on the way up to get his breath back. When we went into the house he knew where the mice were all hiding. My maw went away out the room. My granda showed us. Oh there behind the chair. See in that shoe. Oh look at the side of the cupboard.

Then he done something, then we had shoes in our hands. We sat waiting for them to come out and when they did ye were to bash them, and if ye got one it was great. They were just wee things, and when they were there ye saw how wee they were, a bit of body at the top, then just with their tails. Ye held the shoe at the ready and had to be quick and ye had to get them the first time. Matt was good at getting them. My granda sat on the chair and telled us what to do. Then there were wee wee toty ones. They did not even run so ye just bashed them. My granda said they were babies. But ye were still to bash them, ye were not to let them go else they were going to grow up and it would be a plague of them, so ye had to do it and ye did not want to because if they were just wee and they were babies, but ye had to.

My granda had two cats that were mousers, a big one and a wee one. After we got the mice that was what my granda said, Oh I should just have brought the cats, the cats would have gobbled them up. I was not thinking.

The cats were there in my grannie's house. The wee one lied on the floor near granda's feet. If I went there the cat crawled under granda's chair. He did not like people except my granda. But I could pet him. My grannie did not. The wee cat went to her but she never petted him. Except she spoke to him. Oh what are ye wanting now?

The big cat was a friendly one and rubbed against ye but it stayed in the front room all the time and was down by the window or else on grannie's bed. The sun came in the window on her. But if ye

kicked out the wee cat the big one came in. My granda done it. He just said, Oh I have had enough of you. Away and kick him out son.

So I done it. The cat did not like to go. I just took him. Cats do not like cats. My granda said, They like people better.

What about dogs?

Dogs do not like cats.

Do cats like dogs?

Some cats. Dogs are worse than people, that is what cats think.

Cats do not like anybody, said my grannie, they are just selfish besoms.

Oh we are all selfish besoms, said my granda.

No we are not, said my grannie.

Aye but if they are mousers.

Granda said about me getting one but it was my da, he did not like them. My maw did not either, she said they could be dirty. Where had their paws been? Ye did not know except it was dirt, cats were always in dirt. So were dogs.

My granda was great. If he came to the pond with me, he would have liked it. Some boys had poles and men let them steer the boats on their course and they walked round the banks. The men set the sails then launched the boat in a certain way, just pushing it out. They knew where it would land and telled the boys. If ye did not know people ye just followed a boat ye liked. Some boys chased ye, others let ye stay. They did not listen if ye asked them a question. Ye could never get too close to a boat and they never let ye sail it.

Uncle Billy's boat got lost, else he would have gived it to me. But my granda said it was all just toys, how in our family it was real boats. He ran away to sea when he was fourteen and telled the Captain he was fifteen. He was in the Merchant Navy same as my da except my da's job was better. My granda was just able-bodied. My da said they were ten-a-penny.

I had cousins at sea. One was in the Cadets. I was wanting to join. My maw did not want me to but my da said I could, it was a good life and ye saved yer money, except if ye were daft and

done silly things. He said it to me. I would just have to grow up first.

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There were great smells at the river and big ships went down it, ocean-going. Ye heard the horn and ran to see them. Ye had to run fast so it would not be away. Everybody was cheering maybe if it was a new one just built and here it was launched. Even if it was an old cargo boat or else a container ship. I liked them. Where had they been? They were all old and had been places all over the world. It was great, and ye were walking along and running along beside it then ye had to go round a corner and round a river-street and then back down and there was the river and the boat was there.

Ye heard the horn sometimes and ye were in bed, it was creepy, ye were maybe asleep but ye still heard it, if it was coming out of nowhere, that was how it sounded, ooohhhhh ooohhhhh, ooohhhhh ooohhhhh, oooooohhhhhhhhh, and a big low voice. Just creepy. One time my da was home on leave and took me and Mattie down dead late at night. It was for a special boat. Other people were there, lasses too. We were all there waiting. It was completely foggy and just as if there was no noise hardly anywhere and everything was thick, very very thick, and ye could hardly hear anything and ye could not see nothing except yellow coming through where the lights were, ye were holding on to yer da's hand, then Look, look! That was my da and in a quiet voice, See, look!

And the yellow was coming out, all bright through the fog, and it was all lights, ye could not even see the funnels or the top parts because with the fog all hiding it. But there it was it was the ship out from the fog, ooohhhhh ooohhhhh, it was the special one. My da was just watching and me and Matt. Ye felt a feeling in yer body and how my da was standing straight so we did it as well. He was

Merchant Navy, but he liked the Royal Navy too. And all the sailors all looking down and waving to us and we were cheering, everybody was just cheering and just ye were greeting, I was greeting. Matt laughed but my da never. Then it was gone and its lights too and just the fog again, ooohhhhh ooohhhhh, ye heard the horn going and it was quieter and quieter and quieter.

I liked the wee tugs best. Some ships were gigantic and needed wee ones to help them, that was tugs. My da did not like me saying boats, if it was a cargo ship or a cruiser else a battleship, an oil container, just to say it right. These big ships needed the wee tugs to help them out to sea. If the wee tugs were not there the big ships would not make it through.

These wee tugs were great, they sailed with their chests out and their shoulders straight, that was what I thought. Nobody would ever say a wrong word to them. Ye could see it. One boat was Seasprite and ye thought of something fast and slippery. Sprites were in a book I read, wee kind of ghosts, they were not friendly but the boat was. Some of the sailors waved. They wore navyblue jerseys and trousers, boots and hats. Ye got the same uniform when ye joined the Lifeboys.

When a big ship was passing we walked and ran along with it as far as we could but there were walls and fences and ye could not go too far. We rushed down to the pier and down the wooden steps for the big wash, the waves crashing onto the steps. One day the pier would collapse, ye could see how its timbers were rotting. At the sides of the steps the wood was soft and with a knife ye could slice it away. Ye went as low down the steps as ye could when the tide drifted back. Then jumped up when the waves crashed in. If yer shoes were slippy ye had to be careful no to fall in, and the worst of all if a ferry was there oh mammy and a person got dragged under. Ye heard stories about that and if there was a boat with propellers it was so much the worse. People drowned in the river. If ye fell in ye could not gulp the water because if ye did ye got poisoned or caught diphtheria.

We watched the ship all the way down. It was in silence it sailed and hardly did not move until then ye saw how it was a distance on,

then another distance. How did that happen? Then it had reached the faraway bend. That took a while, if ye were still there and watching ye would maybe be last man, yer pals away home or if Mattie was there he was shouting. Come on you hurry up.

And sometimes I hid from him. My da was all over the world on ships. He liked Brazil the best and Rio de Janeiro.

After he came out he would never ever settle. My grannie said it to my maw. Oh he is used to faraway lands, he will never settle.

My grannie said things that I heard, then if it was to my granda, saying about my da. Oh him! The way she said it, Oh him, talking about my da.

But my da said about her and about people too. He was talking to a man one time and I was listening. It was about my granda and I heard him and he was laughing a wee bit and he says, Wee Larry.

Wee Larry. I did not like him saying that. It was not nice. My granda was not well and it was Lawrence and here he could not stick up for himself, it was just my da saying it, if he did not like my granda, maybe he did not.

My da could speak bad about people and me too. He made jokes. I did not like it. Neither did my big brother, we were watching the telly and he got up and left the room. My da just looked and did not say nothing or else if he looked at my maw but she would just kid on it was okay. He done stuff and she kidded on he did not. That was the same with Matt, if he done stuff, she kidded on he did not, if it was tidying up after him. He just left his stuff, all plates and cups. If it was on the floor, they were just there, he left them. Then if ye stood on them, it was you that got the row. How come? There was a lot of stuff like that.

When I was wee and my da was there ye were better keeping out the way. Him and my maw had their bed in the kitchen. It was a weer bed that fitted in the recess with walls all round except one side. So moan moan moan. That was him. His legs were too long. There was nowhere to put them because it was a wall so they were aye bent. Or if he put his feet away up the wall the blankets all were

lifted up so my maw got freezing. He just done that for a laugh. He could not have his legs straight.

The worst was banging his head into the wall. He hit his elbows and knees but it was his head, if he hit that. Oh oh oh or else using bad words. My maw was at her work. She would have gived him a row. She hated bad words, swearie words. O for G*d sake. That d**n bed.

He said it was not swearie words. G*d and d**n were not swearie words. My maw said they were. But he still said them. But if I said them it was rows or else even ye got hit. I would never say them. But if ye did.

He stayed in bed when he was home on leave. Even if he was awake. He just stayed in it and read books. And moan moan moan. If ye came into the kitchen and made a sound he got annoyed at ye. And ye could not help it, if it was spoons and forks and ye were reaching in the drawer for them. Even if it was a chair and ye bumped it. O for G*d sake. O for G*d sake.

Sorry dad.

Ye are aye screeching the d**n chair.

I did not mean it.

Oh no ye did not mean it.

So he said stuff to ye. I did not like it. Ye got sick of it. He got annoyed or else laughed if ye done something. Oh do not be so daft Kieron you are just a dunderheid.

My maw did not like him saying it. Oh do not call him that.

Oh it is just a laugh.

Dunderheid. My maw gived me rows about if I said heid and not head. But no to my da if he did. So it was dunderheid. Oh it is not dunderheid it is dunderhead. If my maw said it to him but she never. But if it was me, Oh Kieron stop saying heid it is head.

My da never said stuff to my big brother. He liked him the best. People all liked him the best. My granda too. I thought he liked me the best but my grannie said, Oh no son it is your brother.

I did not know if that was true. My granda was the best and he showed me stuff and he said I was his pal, if I was his best pal, maybe I was.

Oh son he likes yer brother the best. He is the firstborn. My grannie said it. Oh he is the firstborn.

I was born second. So they all liked him the best. Except my grannie, she liked me. If everybody liked Mattie she would just like me because that was just fair.

But I wanted my granda. So if my grannie was wrong. If my granda liked me the best. Maybe he did.

My Uncle Billy liked me too, he played with me and gived me stuff for my birthday. No my Auntie May. She gived me kisses but liked Mattie the best. She got him to dance if it was a party. He walked about and did not do it right. Oh come here. And she took him. Oh just stand there and move yer feet.

I was best at it. But I saw her if I danced with her, she gived me a wee look. She would have liked it better if she was not dancing with me. If it was Matt, she would have liked that better. She showed him where to put his feet but no me. But I knew where to put them. But if I did it she did not look. I did not care. She had a boyfriend and was going out with him but then it was a big fight and if ye went to my grannie's there she was. Oh he has kicked her out.

My grannie telled me.

I did not care if she liked Matt the best. Or who else, everybody. But no my granda. I did not think it. He said to me I was his pal and he showed me all stuff to do with everything. Maybe he liked the two of us the best. But maybe he did not, maybe it was just me. If grannie never knew. Maybe he did not tell her, so she did not know. He had a secret wave and showed me it, it was a wee circle ye did with yer hand and when I went home we done it when I was going down the stairs.

The one that did not like me was Matt. Sometimes he did but no to take me places. He went with his pals. They all were big boys. They did not like bringing their wee brothers. But if they had to bring ye. Matt had to take me. My maw said it to him. But he still did not, even if I telled him.

But mum said it, you have got to take me.

Oh tough luck. That was what he said to me. I telled her but she did not hit him.

He had books and would not give me them and my grannie would say it. Oh let the boy see the books.

But he did not want to. Oh he will tear them.

I will not tear them.

He was always reading them and I could not. But if he was not there I saw them, if he was at school and I was not. They were libray books. He got them from the libray. It was near our street beside the park. He went most days and would not take me. I was too young. He got all books there and was reading them and I wanted to. He just shoved me. No, no, away ye go.

Then I was old enough to go and my grannie said it. Oh take him to the libray.

So he took me. I was waiting for him. He came home from school and we went.

We waited at the foot of the stairs with other boys and lasses. It was the Junior Libray. The gate was shut. The woman was coming to let us in. It had to be at the time. Four o'clock. All boys and lasses were there. So then she came and opened the gate and we went up the stairs into the Junior Libray. It was just all books. And good smells were there, and wee seats ye could just sit down on. And tables if ye could put yer books on them, ye were just to do it. A lassie went away and did that and she got books and put them on the table and just sat down. Matt was away over too and he was seeing all the books and took one down and was just looking at it.

I was going to get some but the woman said, Oh you have to stay there. Just take the form for your date of birth. You cannot get any books, you will get them when you bring the form back. Your mum or dad can do it.

So it was the next day. My granda did the form. Matt was coming home from school to take me but what if he would not? I just went. But I could not get in. The gate was shut at the foot of the stairs. So if ye were going to skip in, ye could not. A woman saw me. Oh

the Junior Libray is not open. Look, it is only two o'clock. Go home and come back.

Oh missis can I just wait?

Well it will be a long wait.

She showed me a chair beside the window and I could sit there.

There was more tables and chairs and grown-ups were sitting on them and reading their books. I could see out the window. It was snowing, and real snow for snowballs. People would be flinging them at ye. Big boys after school. Ye could play at stuff out the backcourt. If people were there to play. Snow was good for chases and making good slides. Slides were great. The big boys made them and ye just had to watch if they gave ye a shot because if ye fell and banged yer head, it was just crack and then ohh ohhh.

Stop kicking the table.

It was a man said it to me. He was an old man like granda. Here, he said and gived me a sweetie. A woman came and I got books to read. She gived me another sweetie. I read the books. It was hot, a radiator was there and what happened, I went to sleep and woke up and people were going up the stairs, boys and lasses. I ran over. A woman was at the desk and saw my form. It was the same woman. Oh that is good Kieron here is your ticket.

She waved round all the books and I was to take ones. I got a big pile. I was not to take them all but I was to get two. I got big ones, they were heavy. I opened my jerkin and put them into my body so the snow would not get them. It was thick falling and people had snow over their heads and shoulders.

I went to my grannie's. My maw was not home till after. My grannie's house was up the next street to us, just across the back. Ye could see it from our kitchen window. When I got there my big brother was sitting on the stool at the fire reading a book. I liked that stool. I wished he was not there.

My grannie made me a piece on jam and I showed her my books. Where is granda?

Oh he is just lying down, he will see yer books after.

I did not want Mattie to see them. He did not look. Sshh. He said that if he was reading. Sshh you. I showed them to him and he would

not look. If you are going to read read. That was what he said. If ye wanted the books ye have got the books.

He always read his books, he just sat on the stool and he read them and if ye were playing or ye were doing something, he did not hear ye and if it was grannie saying, Oh Mattie away down the shops a message. Oh Mattie we need potatoes or if it is milk and a loaf.

He did not hear her. She was doing clothes at the sink. But I would go for my grannie. And I said I would and I went to get my shoes and coat but then my big brother was quick off the stool and getting the money and got his shoes on quick and was down the lobby and out the door, banging it shut, so I did not have time to go with him. And my grannie just looking, Oh he will wake yer granda.

Because the noise, granda was sleeping.

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My big brother was taking me on a long walk with his pals. He said I was to go out the back close to see somebody and just wait and he would come in a wee minute to get me. Nobody was out the back. I looked. I was waiting and he never came. When I went out the front that was him away, he just went away. If I could find him. I ran up and down the street but could not. He was away without me and they went to a tunnel under the river. There was all things that they did and just everything and it was all dark and creepy and ye just heard owls hooting and there were ghosts.

He said he would take me the next time but he did not. It was not fair. I was not too wee. If he was going I could go with him. I said it to my grannie how he just ran away and I could not run after them. Oh take the wee boy son. That was what she said to him.

Oh but grannie wee boys cannot keep up with us.

I said, I will so keep up with ye.

No ye will not.

I will.

No ye will not.

Oh let the boy go with ye.

Oh grannie I cannot, if the other boys are there, they do not want wee boys to come, they just make us slow.

Oh.

So he would not do it. Not for my grannie. But if my granda said it then he would. He only did things if my granda said it. I was wanting my granda to say it but he did not, only to me. Oh son you should play with the wee boys, that is the best thing.

But the wee boys did not play good games and did not go any places, they just stayed in the street. Matt and the big boys went all long walks. It was their travels. Mattie said that, Oh we are going our travels.

So I hid up the close and waited so he did not know and then went after him and he was going to his pals, so then I came out. He was angry. Away home you!

No!

Away ye go!

No!

You better if I tell ye.

No, I am not doing it for you.

Blasted pest.

He came to get me and I ran away. But I just came back again and was hiding in a close. I looked out to see them, oh and they were going. I waited a wee minute more then came out. They could not see me. I was keeping into the wall and if they were going to see me I dodged into closes and was hiding.

I came behind them a long way. But a big boy saw me and telled Mattie and he caught me and punched me. But it was too faraway. He could not take me home, so he had to take me. Oh you, you are just a blasted pest. You are a wee stinking rotter.

So I just went. They were going on the ferry and I went on it too but stayed at the back. I would have liked it better if another wee boy went but they did not. When we got off I followed where they were going and if they were walking fast. Oh Mattie wait for me!

Oh listen you it is Matt, not Mattie. Never you call me Mattie.

If I walked beside them he was going to kill me. If he was talking with his pals and he saw me and I was listening. Oh you wee spy. Stop spying.

I was not spying. If he did not see me I was there and he was talking about stuff. I heard him. It was not my fault. If he was saying bad words. Maybe he was. My da would have battered him, because if I telled my maw she would tell him, that was one thing.

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My da was away at sea and I did not see him much except if he was home on leave and ye had to say Grace at night for yer tea, For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful. I went to my grannie's. I would have stayed but when it came night-time I had to go back. Make yerself scarce son. That was what my grannie said, You will have to go home now.

But if I went into a corner and just sat still. There was a space between the cupboard and the wall near the side of the fire and I could go in there and sit down on the floor and the light was dark, they did not see me. My granda said, Oh Vera the boy is playing possum.

My grannie looked where I was, and I was just I do not know just sitting or if my eyes were sleepy or what till then my brother came to get me.

My granda was teaching me tricks. He had cards and showed me how to shuffle them and keep ones to the front or else to the back. My brother sat down beside us. My granda brought him into it and showed him as well. Then my brother said I was to go home because maw wanted me to go a message. He gived me a real angry look and with his fist just what he would do to me if I did not go, when we got home, he was going to mollicate me. I hated him. He said things and then I got angry and he just laughed, and he did it when people were there. And he punched me if nobody was looking. That

was him. I did not like him or else what he said, I did not care, if he was telling me to go home, I was not bothering with what he said. I was not going home for him, he was not the boss. Till then my grannie says, Ye better go home son.

So then I did but if she said to Matt, You take him son. That was not good because outside the house he would just bash me.

My granda showed me good tricks for fighting. Ye had to be quick, quick quick quick. Because if ye were not ye would just get hit. And if ye went down that was you, they kicked ye with their boots. So ye moved quick, the very quickest. And if they got ye in the belly like a bad punch in the guts, and ye were sick, ye went down with it, making ye bend over getting yer breath. So that would stop ye, ye had to avoid a punch in the guts. Granda said that.

He done the windmill on me, where his hands and arms went round and round and ye were to try and get him. Hit inside, Hit inside.

Punching in at him. But ye could not. My granda laughing, his face going all red, stepping about. Then my grannie shouted at him. Stop! Lawrie stop!

Then him breathing, having to breathe. Oh hoooh hoooh, hoooh hoooh, ahooh ahooh, that was the sound.

Lawrie was granda's name, coming from Lawrence, Lawrence McGuigan. My maw's name was Catherine McGuigan before she married my dad. I thought that was a funny name, Smith, and if ye had been called Lawrence as well. So with my name Kieron, my granda's one made it a wee bit better. He did not know any other Lawrence. His maw just called him it.

My grannie shouted at him if he was showing me fighting stuff because he got all puffed out, and sitting on the chair, he could not talk, getting his breath back and just quiet in his throat. Oh Vera I am knackered.

And ye would listen to him with his breathing, hoooh hoooh, ahooh ahooh. Then he would give me another wee punch. See that son, ye have to watch for the sneaky ones.

He went to a boxing club when he was young. His pal fought for Scotland and was a champion. Granda showed me how to spar. We

sparred a lot, if grannie was out at the shops, or else if he sat down, I just done it. It was jab jab jab and use yer elbow, use yer elbow, tuck it in now tuck it in, get that elbow tucked in and move yer shoulder move yer shoulder, and do not slap do not slap, move yer shoulder move yer shoulder bump bump, bump bump, that is the game son.

My Uncle Billy said, Listen to yer granda Kierie boy, but see for a real fight ye have to go right ahead with them. Ye just rush in and clatter them and do not stop till they hit the deck.

That was what Uncle Billy said, and once ye got them down, ye did not let them back up, ye just carried on till they could not hit ye back. Ye had to stop them, else they would stop you. Even if they were decked, ye still had to fight them. So that was booting yer man when he was down. That was dirty fighting. Uncle Billy gived me a wink. But I did not like dirty fighting. If somebody was a dirty fighter, they did that, they kicked people when they were down. They were bullies. A lot of bullies were dirty fighters and there were boys like that.

My granda called Uncle Billy a mug. He used to say that about people, He is a mug.

Uncle Billy winked at me. When granda was not there he telled me if ye were fighting ye just lifted a brick and ye battered the man with it, that was how ye done it, especially a wee boy like me because if they were bigger, so ye just had to do it.

§

Swimming was the best. My grannie thought it too. She took me and Mattie. She liked going but no all the time. She was a past champion and a best swimmer and was in a Ladies' Club. She was showing me how to swim and when my maw was wee she showed her. My granda made a joke. Oh but yer grannie is a true champion, yer maw only goes to get a bath son she does not like her hair getting wet.

My maw only went on Saturdays. My da came if he was home on leave. Oh I have seen enough water, and now I have to swim in it.

That was to me and Matt because we were wanting him to come. And he laughed at my grannie, Oh she looks like a swan.

We were laughing too but it was cheeky. I did not like it. He said stuff about grannie.

My granda never came to the swimming. I wanted him to come. But he did not. Oh maybe the next time son. Yer brother will take ye.

He gived Mattie the money for us to go. I still could not swim and kept to the shallow end. A rail went round the pond and I held on to it. My elbow was wedged in and got jammed. I had to twist it to get out but it would not come. A big boy came to help but could not get it so the man had to come and get me out.

Sometimes yer feet went under the rail and balanced right, so ye floated good. My big brother did that. He let go with his hands so he went right back in the water just with his head and shoulders up. He put his hands behind his head, so if he was lying down. Oh I am going to have a wee sleep.

I tried it but my feet came out from the rail and I went under the water and back over and the water went all in my mouth and up my nose, choking and swallowing, I could not find the bottom and was nearly drowning. Lucky for me I never.

My big brother could swim good. My granda said he was to show me. I telled him that but he just said, Oh grannie is showing ye.

Oh but you have to show me as well.

No I do not.

But if granda said.

Well I do not care if granda said.

You have to show me.

My brother just swam away. I saw him. I held onto the rail and he swam back and said to leave go and he would show me. I would not.

Because if he just ducked me under. Boys done that. If ye were there at the shallow end and they came by, they got yer head and

ducked ye and ye could not get out and were drowning. They were just laughing. Matt said he would not do it to me. But then he was laughing and splashing at me and pulling off my hands. He swam underwater so ye never saw him. He just came up at ye or else stayed under and grabbed yer legs or else got up and round yer shoulders, gripping ye over the top and with all his might, so pushing ye off he was just pushing ye off, and ye would go right down and the water was coming closer so ye were kicking him and if he was laughing, then he was angry and just punched ye, trying to loose off my hands again, gripping tight on my wrists and it was sore, squashing them down and pulling them but I would not let go it was just like I could not I could not and I was shouting.

So if I did not stop he really would batter me. Once we got home he was going to. That was what he said. He pulled up my fingers one by one by one. I was kicking him to stop so he would not. He grabbed my trunks to pull them down so I had to leave go one hand to hold them so he was grabbing my other one, gripping the wrist, so he got it loose and I could not stop him so that was me and I went down and down and if ye could not reach the bottom. Not if it was the deep end. And ye rolled to the side and if ye hit the wall oh ye were lucky if ye could touch it so then ye went back up and ye were at the rail and could just grab it, spitting out all the water. It was all down inside ye and nearly if ye were going to be sick, coughing it all out and just spluttering it out yer nose.

Oh you are all snotters! Matt laughing at me. I did not want him and turned away my head. But he swam round. I turned my head the other way, so then he held my chin. You are not greeting?

Not for you anyway.

I swam down with ye.

No ye did not.

I did so. Ye would see me if ye looked. Daft wee pest, just open yer eyes.

If I opened my eyes I would see him, he said that. He was there when I went down and was watching me so I would not drown. If I opened my eyes I would see him.

Oh come on and try again.

But I was no going to so he just swam away. I hung onto the rail. When I wanted to move I walked up the wall so my feet were just down from it and my b+m was sticking out and I could just kick and bounce round the side doing it. People were coming the other way, if they could not swim. They passed their hands round ye or you passed yours round them and they had to stay still a wee minute so ye did not miss the railing cause if ye did ye went under the water and spluttering, ye were choking, and it was hard to find the rail again.

Then if somebody swam over the top of ye, their feet kicking out. Big boys dived in and their arms bumped ye hard, just like a real punch. Then if boys jumped in and it was on top of ye. That happened too. They were not supposed to. They just came running right out from the showerplace and whooshed right in, how they done it with their knees drawn up under their chin, dive-bombers. Haawwwww. That was what they shouted.

So that was you.

If boys were there that were pals they had good games. They stayed in the pond till the men shouted at ye, All out All out.

They wore white jackets. If ye did not go when they telled ye they kicked open the door of yer cubicle and got yer towel and hung it on the iron railing that went between the cubicles and the pond. If it was your towel ye had to get out else the men flung it in the water. Some of the boys still did not go out.

All out! All out! So the men went into people's cubicles and got all their clothes and hung them on the railing and then ye had to get out because if ye did not the men dumped them in the pond. Ye saw them floating in the water and sinking down. They had a big pole to get them out. So if everything was wet, yer shirt and trousers soaking. Yer maw would give ye a right doing or if yer da was there. Some of the boys said they would just take their clothes into the steamie and get a woman to dry them.

The steamie was next door. It had steps up the same as the swimming baths.

When ye came out the swimming baths a big queue was waiting on the pavement outside. If people had more money, if they were

allowed, they joined the queue to get back in. Me and Mattie did not.

§

Parks were on the other side of the river. One was one way and the other was the other and they were both good. I liked them. Usually we went to the other. It was a big big walk and ye went different roads and there were closes to go through and sometimes there were good jumps out the back. But if other boys were there and saw ye so it was a fight so Matt and his pals had to watch it. And then if it was big jumps over the middens and back walls, if I was too wee. Oh you just stand there.

So I was just to wait for them. But if it was wee jumps I went and just did them, and sometimes they were bigger and I still jumped it. And if I did not make it and was gripping on and digging in my feet. So if Matt came and helped me. Usually he did, or else his pals. They pulled my hands so I got up.

But if ye done a jump. Or else walking a dyke. I loved it. Then if it was a good one ye did and the big boys saw ye, so if they winked at ye and then to Matt. Oh yer young brother is walking the dyke!

Matt just looked and then when I came down he maybe chased me. Because if I fell and broke my arm or else my head. Boys broke their head. Matt would have got a doing, my maw would tell my da and he would batter him.

Then going in shops. Him and his pals were knocking. I had to stay outside the shop but I saw them and if they had chocolate and gived me a bit. Matt did not. Maybe if he was not knocking, I did not see him, but he went in the shop.

The park where the big boys went did not have a pond but it had a river, just a wee river and no boats went on it. It had smells too but different ones. They were looking for fish. But no baggie minnows like in our own park, the ones here were big and ye could eat them.

Maybe if men were fishing they would give ye one. That was what they said. But ye never saw any. Ye could not swim in the water. It was too slimy and was all soapy. If ye swallowed it ye got poisoned and ye were to watch it if ye paddled yer feet, if ye fell over the stones and drank any because ye would choke to death. Matt was shouting at me.

There were railings to keep ye out. They just jooked through and I came behind. Bushes and trees were there and it was good for games and ye could go down and there was the river and there was all chuckiestones and ye could reach in and get them and fire them anyplace, even if ye were skliffing them over the top of the water, the boys were counting them and seeing who done the most. They did other stuff or else climbed the trees and all other stuff, whatever it was. I watched or else I could climb a tree too. One tree they all went on a branch and it snapped and they fell down and went in the water. It was just a laugh. It was a great big branch and they carried it and flung it in the water and it went sailing down till then it got stuck. So if they got other stuff and made a dam. They flung in big boulders and were jamming in stuff, old planks of wood and all things lying about. I was just watching. But two men came and were shouting and they ran away so me too because if I was left, if they left me, so I would be lost.

In one place a big wall was there and went right across and under the river. The water gushed over the top of it and fell down, and it was a waterfall. Here ye took off yer socks and shoes to climb down the bank and ye went up and then ye climbed from there up onto the wall to walk across. But the water gushed over yer ankles and ye had to watch it if it dragged ye over and it was all slippery with green stuff twirling over the big stones and if it got yer ankles oh mammy ye were tripped up and that was you over the waterfall so ye were linking hands. The big boys all did it. All link hands.

Could anybody swim? People were saying it. Ones that could would save the ones that could not. Oh you take him and you take you. Matt got me. He was not going to take me but he did. Give me yer hand you.

He gripped my hand tight and it was too tight and even it was sore and his nails digging in but he just did it so I would not fall

down. If you go in, I am not saving ye. That was what he said. You will just drown, so ha ha ha.

So then we went and we were just going across step by step and step by step, and a big boy shouted, Do a pee!

So everybody all done one. Even if ye were not needing ye tried a wee bit, standing up on the wall and doing it over the waterfall. It was down from a road bridge. Snobby people were there. Then seeing us peeing and pointing down and men were angry and shouting. Get out of there. Get out of there.

So we hurried up and were going over the wall one by one by one by one and it was all slippery and with green stuff and the water gushing fast oh mammy, Hurry hurry. Because the cops were coming and were going to get us if we did not go faster faster faster Kieron faster. And Mattie was holding my hand tight rushing me and my feet were splashing and splashing till then we were on the other side. Oh and the big boys were all shouting at the snobby people, Hohhhh hohhhh, and just bad words and all were laughing.

Mattie let go my hand now and we all ran down a wee trail, down through bushes and away up a wee hill and over, all still laughing. Oh I cannot run I am too busy laughing. A big boy said that.

So now there was the gate and we went through it and out the park.

Oh is everybody there? Where is Kieron? Oh there he is.

Matt was looking at me. Oh he was going to punch me, but he did not.

It was a big walk farther down now and then way way along to get to the real river, that was our river, just the biggest one, and then the ferry and that was you ye were safe.