

Wait it Out

11 April 2014. The distances between things that I trust. The spacing of words in a quietly spoken sentence. Cars in an evenly-spaced line beside a row of churches, charity shops and bookies, candy coloured petals from cherry blossom trees, newly planted along an avenue of derelict terrace houses. Across the road, darkened windows of new apartments face the other direction. There is an impression of mountains uncovered by clouds today, naked in the remnants of winter light.

Being alive somehow to the uncertainty of air, climates of intimate possibility spreading down the passages of the lungs, a virus of necessity. Words lie cupped in my throat, stalled for direction.

Sometime in the afternoon it was all over by chance.

31 August 1994. My sister and I are driving towards Belfast when the news breaks on the car radio that the Provisional IRA have declared a cessation of military operations. Set casually in between pop songs, the words are delivered in the matter of fact voice of a newscaster. We experience the shock of incredulity, and consider turning the car around and driving back out to the village where my parents live. That night, the city erupts into scenes of triumphalism in some areas, while in our streets the atmosphere is charged by animalistic despair. Cars of armed men career through the streets, firing indiscriminately, emptying their guns into the blackness. The security forces absent themselves, standing back from the riotous outpouring of fury, disbelief and euphoria. A day later comes the silence. A deadening silence shaped by exhilaration turned to exhaustion. A unanimous wordlessness heralding in the new political reality. No one had imagined a two-tongued language that could bind that most unyielding of words – peace.

13 April 2014. The scent of lilies seeps in from the dining room through a half-opened door. Dense and petulant, the smell awakens unkempt memories. Disorganised thoughts of events pry their way into the present without order or merit. She switches on the kettle behind closed doors. Rain beads on the window, scattered thin by wind gusts cutting around the corner of the bungalow. A seam of light crosses the carpet, exact and rectangular, leading to the hallway. Voices come through the clattering of china cups. As they sit down, the chairs shift fractionally beneath their weight on the tiled floor. The chimney roars with the wind trapped in its hollow. They talk of a neighbour sent to prison for 15 years, a series of murders, a local gang of paramilitaries, a feud.

7 December 1982. The Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) explode a bomb in the Droppin' Well Bar Disco in Ballykelly. The attack leaves 17 people dead and another 30 injured, including one British soldier of the Cheshire Regiment, identified in an interview as 'Peter'. This soldier remembers sitting in the disco drinking a pint when he sees a white light like a camera flash, followed by a sound, which he compares to the cracking of a ruler against a school desk. As the explosion rips through the building, Peter recalls that 'Mirror Man' by the Human League is playing in the background.

2003. I visit the Droppin' Well Bar, still open and with interior décor resolutely reminiscent of the 1980s. I speak for some time with the bar owner, whose sister was one of six local women killed in the bombing. The civilian fatalities were widely condemned by representatives of both communities but, in a statement by the INLA that aims to justify the massacre, these women were described as 'consorts' of the enemy. The conversation with the bar owner falters into an awkward silence after this and I exit to the ladies' toilets. Inside, the surfaces are entirely stainless steel, with scratched metal mirrors bolted to the walls. A broken light fitting hangs in the hallway entrance to the disco. The bar fronts onto a busy road, separated by a paved beer garden. Buried in the hedge are a few hanging fairy lights, remnants of Christmas. In the centre of the space stands a brick and wood structure that mimics a wishing well.

All actions, regardless of how horrific, are eventually claimed and justified by terrorists. Justification is not an ethical act, but one of ownership, an act of dominance positioned beyond negotiation.

1975. A child's dress is displayed by the door of the clothes shop we are about to leave. Its ladybird pattern catches my mother's attention. She takes my sister's arm and leads her back again into the shop, back to try it on behind the thick grey curtain of the cold changing room at the back of the shop. The dress is red and black with three small brass chains sewn into the front. It is much more flamboyant than my mother's usual taste, but its rich redness belongs with the vivid red of my sister's hair. The dress is purchased, and packaged in tissue paper, and as we go to leave the shop for the second time, the window panes shudder and the ground tremors, and a massive explosion rips through the street. Soldiers arrive quickly and, fearing a second explosion, we are ushered into the back of the shop with the assistants, where we stand among boxes of school uniforms. If it hadn't been for the ladybird dress we would all have been in the Rosemary Bar when the bomb exploded.

When we talk about it now, my mother only remembers the incident by giving an exhaustive account of the circuitous route we had to take to get home. She recalls the street names in order, the difficulties of carrying the packages with two young children, the failed attempt at getting a lift with a friend who is caught on the other side of the security cordon, the delay in finding a taxi, the route diversions blocking the Newtownards Road where her car is parked.

The man in the photograph appears to be grinning, a streak of blood lining his forehead and descending cross-like, downwards via the right eye and nostril to the ebb of the mouth where it crevices inwards, a route that follows the habits of a smile.

His eyes are transfixed on the camera that captures his awkward shame. He displays the bewilderment of all those unmasked by a bomb.

4 March 1972. In a famous press photo, two women climb out through the remains of the windows of the Abercorn Bar. These two women are my aunts, Sally and Edna Johnston. They survive the bomb that explodes at 4.30pm on a Saturday afternoon, and which kills Anne Owens and Janet Bereen, two young women who are sitting in the cubicle directly next to them. The bombers are never identified, despite eyewitness accounts describing two teenage girls walking out of the bar and leaving behind them a handbag, near where the five-pound gelignite bomb was later discovered to have exploded. As well as the two fatalities, 139 people are left severely injured. Many of those socialising in the Abercorn that day are women and children of both religions, although the suspected targets are off-duty soldiers drinking in the upstairs bar. Blame is finally attributed to the Provisional IRA. However, because many of the fatally wounded women are Catholic, blame is speculated towards loyalist organisations and even falsely claimed by the Ulster Vanguard.

Carnage is the stand-alone word used to describe unimaginable destruction. It is not interchangeable with the word 'bloodbath' or 'massacre'. All carry separate distinctions. Carnage has associations with butchery and slaughter, connotations of carnal flesh and its mutilation. Many survivors of Abercorn lose limbs and eyes, two sisters Jennifer and Rosaleen McNern lose their legs. Sally and Edna, despite their proximity to the handbag and through whatever logistic of fate, escape unscathed.

Gelignite is safe and mouldable to handle, requiring a detonator before it becomes viable as an explosive, yet it is prone to 'sweating'.

Some months later, in response to both the Abercorn atrocity and a separate incident, Edna takes her own life, in the cab of a lorry, with an overdose of sleeping tablets.

The shame of it is to know how things really are deep inside yourself, and to continue to function every hour of every day on auto-drive, the grim-dance of face-saving, time-wasting, energy-sucking, self-absorbed terrain of self-disgust. Not every day, but some days.

I don't remember what year it is, although I do know it is late afternoon because I am walking towards the Bedford Street bus station. Turning a corner, I am confronted by a security checkpoint that blocks pedestrian access. Behind this police line I glimpse the devastation of an entire street, gutted and upturned by a series of bomb blasts. Everything in the street has been wiped out, its familiarity eclipsed by the awareness of a new consistency to the air – static, saturated with glass and dust, contained in a slow, gyrating descent from the hole the explosion has torn in the sky. A world in reverse, returning inexplicably to surrender into a new dimension. Perhaps it is perverse to say it, but I see here in its chaotic heart a piercing beauty, as if the air has become crystal, its momentous darkness haemorrhaging with light.

Still do you know what it costs me to smile.

8 June 2019. The air is thick with drizzling rain falling sideways in haphazard sheets, moving in spasms above the trees and traffic. Voices bleed through the wall, him and her, him and her, they speak with the level intonation of a broadcaster, compact sentences landing occasionally on comments that spike on a peak of high emphasis. An Ulster news summary coming through the bedroom wall, police searching for a missing father of five who they believe to have been murdered. Talk of searches in Strangford Lough, a police diving team dredging for the remains. This current murder gives way to a historical news story. The omnipresence of past violent is continually regurgitated within and beneath the local news, a trickle of familiar words and footage from the 1970s or 80s, convoys of armoured cars navigating tight-necked streets.

Riots have started over something as simple as two women arguing over the price of a bar of soap. Riots have ended over something as simple as a mother putting a frying pan into the middle of the street in front of a land rover, disabling it when the pan becomes lodged against the wheel chassis.

Deaths in hotels, in nightclubs, in bars, in restaurants, in shops, in garages, in factories, in living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms, in doorways, streets, roads, fields, forests, rivers, playing fields, waste land, in cars, in taxis, in buses, in lorries, in broad daylight, in twilight, dawn to dusk, every day, ongoing, until nothing is left innocent, nothing remains unmarked. The intricate circumnavigation of places too sad to enter. And yet, there exists a seismic sense of belonging that resonates at a deep molecular level, the wrong roads you use to get yourself home.

You couldn't be further from the truth.

The Troubles created a generation of escapologists. My generation became experts in the art of disappearances and denials followed by ignominious returns. My memory is fatally fractured, it divides and subdivides and disintegrates, but never outgrows its causes.

Counting and measuring the spaces between cars, looking at a watch sideways on a turned wrist, the effect of today's light on today's skin, a bony wrist, blue-veined, an unrepentant pulse, nails that disappear into a broken white line lost at the edge of a limb. This point of disappearance where the heat of my blood wells outwards, evaporating beyond the skin or, conversely, retracts chastened to the bone. All of this an intricate retreat before, during and beneath a graceless inner war.

Sandra Johnston
Dublin, August 2019.