

Crossing Over in 1969

1969 was a momentous year for lots of reasons. To the rest of the world it was the year when Neil Armstrong uttered those famous words.

“One small step for a man one giant leap for mankind.”

Everyone was glued to their small black and white televisions, 600 million viewers the world over and watched in awe as these astronauts made their moon landing in the Apollo lunar module and stepped out onto the pale, barren, rocky, silent and desolate landscape that no man had ever stepped on before. Buzz Aldrin came behind Neil as the second man on the moon, and every pub and TV quiz since have echoed the names of these men which have oft been repeated over the last fifty years.

But 1969 was momentous for me on two different levels. One was about what was happening not just in our world or even our universe but what was happening in my life, my city and my world. Was there a seismic shift in the atmosphere in 1969 when there were so many student demonstrations in Paris and in England for example? What was it about that year that stands out for me in so many ways and for so many reasons? Well that summer at eighteen, I had just left school and was waiting for the results of my A levels to decide in which direction my life would take me and most of my friends who were all at that point in life were doing exactly the same thing. My friend Isobel was hoping to get into Art College in Belfast and my other friend Therese had applied for nursing, while I had applied to go to a teacher training college in Manchester.

That summer there had been unrest in Belfast and in Derry, as the civil rights movement got underway copied from their black counterparts in the US and singing “We Shall Overcome” as their peaceful marches made their way through the catholic towns of Coalisland in Co. Tyrone, and the centre of Derry just as they had on the streets of Alabamba and Atlanta Georgia. The marchers carried banners calling for “One man, one vote” but had been met with hostility and aggression by the police in Northern Ireland, just as they had on the streets of Atlanta. They too had been hit by batons, were water hosed, had rubber bullets fired at them, and tear gas canisters shot at them. The subsequent rioting that had ensued left whole areas battle scarred, with burnt out cars, broken glass, and broken up pavements. On the British national news at six o clock, English journalists who were flying over to Northern Ireland in droves stood on the streets of Belfast and asked the question.

“Why is this happening?”

“What do they mean when they say one man one vote?”

Because until this moment in 1969, no-one in the rest of Britain let alone Europe, realised that what existed in England, Scotland and Wales did not exist in Northern Ireland: there *was* no real democracy. Boundaries were gerrymandered in order to achieve a Protestant unionist majority, even in areas like Derry which had a majority of Catholics living there. They had little representation in Stormont, because as Lord Brookeborough Prime Minister of Northern Ireland from 1943-63 had said quite proudly.

“We have a Protestant government for a Protestant people” and thought that after fifty years of unionists being in power, that that would remain the case forever. He also said that he wouldn’t even employ a Catholic gardener to cut the grass around the Stormont building.

Against this backdrop of unrest and fear, and rioting, something happened in 1969 that is forever etched in my memory. It was August and a clear summer’s evening when my friend Isobel and I decided to walk to visit our other friend Therese who lived less than a quarter of a mile away. I can well remember trying to break in some new black patent shoes, and moaning about a sore heel all the way there, with my poor long suffering friend having to put up with me. In the days before mobile phones you were never quite sure if you caught someone in or not and as luck would have it or not, Therese had gone for a driving lesson, but her father assured us that as she shouldn’t be too long we could come in and wait for her. We noticed his brand new white saloon car parked outside and were envious that Therese an only child, whose mother had not long died, would soon be driving it when she passed her driving test. We chatted to her dad but after waiting an hour or so we thought that Therese had gone somewhere else after her lesson, and as it was now 10 o’clock and beginning to get dark, and particularly because there had been political unrest in the area previously, we decided to venture home and see Therese another time. I limped as we chatted idly making our way down the main road and were about to cross over at a junction. We had just stepped across to the other side, when some shots rang out, the bullets hitting the wall to our left and embedding themselves there just above our heads. I remember running as fast as I could in a blur completely oblivious to the fact that my new shoes were killing me, that my heel was bleeding, that there was a stitch in my side and seriously doubting that if Mary Peters the famous Northern Irish Olympian athlete had tried to race me that evening, I would have been beaten.

Of course we reached home safe and sound and when we caught our breath and straightened up we actually laughed at the fact that I had completely forgotten about my pinched feet in those new shoes. The stitch in my side was investigated just in case I *had* been hit (having had a friend who had been injured previously by a ricochet bullet weeks before) and we wondered if we were the intended target or if the gunman had a bad aim. Nevertheless we were glad to be alive as

unfortunately ricochet bullets could also kill as we heard daily on the news bulletins. I survived unharmed, and so did my brand new black patent shoes. However, the dent in that wall left by the bullet bore the ugly testimony of our lucky escape, every time we passed that spot for years afterwards

However, the next morning on the local news which everyone listened to almost as a necessity, we heard that the street we had just visited the night before had been burned to the ground. The whole street! We had just left Therese's house at about ten o'clock as I said, but after midnight, gangs of protestant mobs in retaliation for the rioting which had unsettled them, had decided to ethnic cleanse the catholic areas which ran parallel to theirs. The reserve police force, or the B specials as they were known then, who were meant to be the protectors of *all* of its citizens, held the residents back while they allowed the gangs from their own communities, to torch, bomb and intimidate the residents from their homes. That brand new white car we had been admiring the night before had been used unsuccessfully as a barricade to keep the marauders out. It was now a burnt out shell like the rest we saw from time to time before the bulldozers came in to clear them. We also heard on the news, that all of those unfortunate people who had been left homeless, had to go to a school hall or neighbours for that night and subsequent nights, until they could all be accommodated elsewhere. They had to leave their homes with just the clothes on their backs, literally. We were desperate to hear of any news about Therese and her father, but heard nothing. However the day after that, Therese came to my house. She wanted me to go with her to help her to try to find something she could salvage from her home. As we walked along the main road the atmosphere was charged and electric and we could sense the feeling of gloom and darkness that pervaded the very air we breathed. Even those police standing on each corner looked edgy and ill at ease. Therese who had been brought up without prejudice in a home where politics were never discussed, began to verbally abuse those police standing around. I had never seen her so angry, but I managed to steer her away completely understanding where she was coming from.

When we got to Bombay Street, the sight which met me was something I shall never forget. I imagined, well I sort of pictured that the skeleton of Therese's house would still be there, but because she lived on the corner of the street which ran adjacent to the Kashmir Road, nothing but a very low wall edged an interior of charred rubble. It looked like the Luftwaffe had completely blitzed the whole street from above. I was so stunned and shocked and completely immobile as I stared at this cataclysmic sight. No evidence existed, that this busy working class street with its inhabitants going about their business two days before existed. It was ghostlike, eerily quiet and empty. Rows of houses which days before had been full of life, where children had played

skipping games or ball games on the street, now stood like giant blackened shells, mutilated, scarred and devoid of any interior.

Therese, meanwhile who had obviously seen all of this two nights before and had lived through the whole trauma, stepped gingerly over the low wall of what had been her home and bent down to begin lifting rubble, and turn bricks over to find something; anything to remind her of her mother. I eventually joined her and waded through the debris to help her, but I have to confess that I was absolutely no use to her at all, as my eyes blurred with tears. I bent down anyway and tried to search frantically too. Therese was stoic and more desperate, than I had ever seen her, and her determination was rewarded with a piece of a gold cross and chain that she recognised as her late mothers. She was so relieved and happy that she held the cross tightly in her fist against her as she closed her eyes and raised her face to the roofless skyline.

So, as Neil Armstrong on July 20th 1969 exactly fifty one years ago, had stepped onto a rocky, barren cold landscape on a journey that the rest of mankind would never ever forget, by *choice*, Therese *without* choice, stepped onto the barren, rocky, pale and cold space that had encapsulated every memory of what she had previously experienced, and what had been her life for the eighteen years that preceded that awful night on 15th August 1969, just a few weeks later. A small moment in time, but a momentous night which changed the lives of all those friends and neighbours who lived there, exactly 51 years ago, that none of *us* would ever, ever forget.