

## 1

I stood in the silt, buck naked and covered head to toe in my own excrement, as my classmates sang:

*Whoa-oh Big Jessie (Bam-ba-Lam)*  
*Whoa-oh Big Jessie (Bam-ba-Lam)*  
*Big Jessie is a fat (Bam-ba-Lam)*  
*Ginger twat (Bam-ba-Lam)*

Seventeen of them, laughing and guldering till the spittle leapt from the corners of their mouths. Rabid wee gobshites the lot of them. They wouldn't let up, not for a second, not even when a passing Viking longship gunned its engine on Lough Erne. The replica boat ferried people round the Fermanagh lakes, tracing a figure of eight round Crom Castle and Gad Island lookout tower. Loaded with tourists it was. Every one of them took a snap of my shivering, shit-smearred behind.

As if this wasn't embarrassing enough, my brain chose that moment to despatch a cruel and involuntary electric signal to my groin, summoning my first truly memorable erection. I was ten. It was 1977 – the Year of the Wookie. It would go down as the year

the Queen enjoyed her Silver Jubilee, the year Elvis enjoyed his last cheeseburger, the year Ram Jam had their hit (Bam-ba-Lam), and the year Jessie Black shit himself and got a hard-on in front of *everybody*.

I would never live it down.

I cursed myself. I had suspected the school trip was a bad idea from the moment Mr Swain had told assembly it involved water sports and one of the big boys (Kirk McClaren) bleated, 'That'll be Jessie Black wetting his bed, sir.' Cue schoolboy laughter. From Mr Swain.

The poster outside the assembly hall had initially seemed inviting enough. It promised an activity weekend on the Ulster Lakes, canoeing, caving, biking, climbing, and abseiling. If I wasn't already persuaded, then Kirk McClaren sealed the deal. He told all the first years that if you didn't go on the trip you were gay. This became the last desperate thrust of my argument when trying to prise the £10 deposit out of my dad.

'But if I don't go, I'll be gay,' I said.

My dad considered my predicament. He thumbed the stray straggles of Three Nuns tobacco into the bowl of his pipe and, displaying characteristic empathy, said, 'This fella – McClaren is it – judging by his surname his forefathers were Scottish. They wore kilts. No man in our family ever wore a dress, you tell him that. We'll see who's gay then.'

'But Dad, he'll punch my lights out.'

Dad sucked the flame off a Swan Vesta and tossed the spent match onto the hearth. It missed. He looked me up and down and proffered one last piece of sage-like wisdom. 'Son,' he said, 'you got to feel sorry for Scottish transvestites. In a country whose fiercest warriors dress in tartan skirts, any fella who dolls

himself up in the full Shirley Bassey won't be taken seriously unless he invades Poland.'

'Dad.'

'Jessie.'

'The carpet's on fire.'

As my father stomped on the burning match my hopes of visiting the Ulster Lakelands were extinguished with it. No canoeing or archery for me. The only activity I could look forward to would be a bout of bare-knuckle boxing with McClaren in the school quad.

I sought sanctuary in the kitchen. Mum was polishing Dad's shoes with a pair of his Y-fronts. When she saw me, she rinsed her hands under the tap. She moved to the cupboard and reached down a biscuit jar. I informed her that a biscuit wasn't going to make me feel better. Not even a fancy one, like a Taxi or a Wagon Wheel. She allowed her hand to form a snake and slid it into the jar. She produced a big, orange note, a tenner, and handed it to me. She nodded towards the living room and made a *shush* sound, putting a stained finger to her lips. This was between her and me.

And so I found myself not being gay at the Lakelands Activity Centre. The huge complex dominates the tiny village of Kesh, which sits buttonholed to the northern lapel of Lower Lough Erne. For some reason Lower Lough Erne is actually above Upper Lough Erne on the map, a fact I queried with Mr Swain. He was sharing a seat at the front of the Ulsterbus with Miss Blundell, our new student supply teacher. Miss Blundell was wearing leather trousers like Suzi Quatro. Mr Swain had his hand on her knee. I guessed he must have been checking the leather was real.

'Sir, why is Lower Lough Erne above Upper Lough Erne?' I asked.

Swain whipped his hand off Miss Blundell's

trousers and adjusted his wedding ring. He was beetroot.

‘What do you want, boy?’

‘Why is Lower Lough Erne above Upper Lough Erne, sir?’

Mr Swain gave me exactly the sort of considered and informative answer a child expects from his Head of Department, alerting my young mind to the lively possibilities of physical geography. ‘Why is your mouth above your arsehole, Black? It’s to stop you talking shite. Now get back to your seat before I skelp ye.’

I made my way back down the bus to a chorus of jeers and a *rat-a-tat* of coins hitting windows. The weekend had started badly and from there on it deteriorated.

The words ‘activity weekend’ and ‘fat kid’ do not sit happily in the same sentence. I had been looking forward to the abseiling right up until the instructor made everybody wait while they searched for an adult-sized harness to accommodate my considerable girth. We went rock-climbing. I was forced to ascend last, my classmates refusing to come up behind me for fear the rope wouldn’t cope. My weight didn’t inhibit my enjoyment of the archery. That activity only became physically demanding when I became the target for the other kids’ arrows. I wanted to do the biking but anticipated that McClaren and his cohorts would be out of sight before I located the gears on my Grifter. Not wishing to eat their dust, I took the safer option of horse-riding. Bad move. I was the only boy partaking, forced to don my riding helmet among a gaggle of giggling girls. And barely one mile into the trek my pony – Sherpa – had to be retired after experiencing some sort of cardio-respiratory murmur.

The instructor assured me the horse was getting old and his wheezing was in no way connected to the large ginger load on his back. Whatever, I had to dismount and suffer the indignity of walking Sherpa back to the centre.

I was told to spend the rest of the afternoon playing table tennis with Miles Huggins, the school asthmatic. I had never really spoken much to him until that afternoon. We hadn't really had the chance to form a friendship. He was always missing school because of his illness. He was as thin as a liquorice pipe with skin the colour of sweetie mice. One of the lenses on his glasses was permanently frosted.

He thumped me 11–9, 11–7, 11–1.

Miles tried to cheer me up by turning his eyelids inside out and saying *ah-so* like a Benny Hill Chinaman. He knew how to make me laugh. I asked him if he wanted to be my friend and he said *sure* and gave me a go on his inhaler.

So it wasn't a totally miserable weekend. Miss Blundell even took us on a tour of the lough. We cut a trail through the barbed gorse and bejewelled brambles, Joanne (for Miss Blundell had told us her name) indicating this and pointing out that with the unflagging enthusiasm of a student supply teacher. She took us to the Marble Arch caves, an underworld of rivers, waterfalls, winding passages and lofty chambers. When we emerged, we witnessed a flock of Canada geese skimming the water like bouncing bombs. Joanne told us that somewhere at the bottom of the lough there lay a squadron of Catalina flying boats, used in the Second World War to locate Germany's deadly U-boats in the Atlantic. It was a Catalina from Lough Erne, she claimed, that spotted the *Bismarck* in 1941. A day later, the warship literally went down in history.

I loved Miss Blundell and I hoped that she would get a full-time job at our school. Mr Swain seemed similarly impressed. He was always complimenting her and he even made the effort to go to her room after lights out to help her prepare her syllabus.

We were due to spend the Sunday on the water, canoeing, sailing and windsurfing. The prospect filled me with dread, not least because we were all to wear wetsuits. They're not the most flattering of garments even on a slim fella and, sure enough, I emerged from the changing hut encased in rubber, looking like a snake that had swallowed a sheep.

Before we got changed, the instructor had made us all laugh by saying that professional divers liked to pee in their wetsuits to keep themselves warm. This seemed to activate the malicious gene that was irreparably written into Kirk McClaren's DNA. I had just managed to force one leg into my wetsuit when he collared me.

'Oi, Jessie, I hope you're going to pee in that when you zip it up,' he said.

'No, course not.'

'What are you, a poof? If you wanna be a pro, you got to pee in your wetsuit. Did you not hear the instructor?'

'Have you peed in yours?'

McClaren was conscious of the other boys gathering round him. Flies to a turd. He upped the ante.

'Peed in it? I've done more than that. Have you heard of free divers?' he asked.

'Course,' I said, even though I hadn't.

'Then you'll know those boys are the business. They can hold their breath underwater for hours. They can stop their heart. They dive so deep they get crushed to a third of their size. And it's cold down there. Minus

fifty-seven. And do you know how they keep warm?’

I nodded. Hadn’t a clue.

‘That’s right, they shit in their wetsuits. It gets squished all around them and keeps them warm. So that’s what me and the guys are doing, isn’t that right, Steeky?’

My fellow first years gazed up at Stephen Meeks. He was the school’s head boy yet he preferred to be relegated to the role of McClaren’s right-hand man. Meeks bent slightly on his knees and concentrated his expression like a baby filling its nappy. He grunted. He straightened. Then he hopped up and down, windmilling his arms. ‘God, that feels good,’ he said. ‘Aye, it’s like a sauna in this here suit, so it is.’

‘See, Jessie. That’s what real men do. They shit in their wetsuits. Or perhaps you aren’t a real man?’

‘Course I am.’ As if to emphasize the point, I tucked my dick into the rubber suit and hauled the arms over my shoulders. I slowly zipped it up, taking care not to catch a roll of fat or an errant nipple.

‘Are you sure you’re a man? Isn’t that a wee pair of girly tits you’ve got on ye? You should be changing with the girls. They tell me you like riding ponies.’

Again, the laughter rattled the rafters. But I wasn’t going to let him beat me. Not this time, not in front of everybody. For once I was going to do the right thing.

‘Course I’m a real man. I can prove it.’

I braced my guts and, thanking the Lord that I’d eaten thirds at breakfast, I began to empty my bowels into the suit. That the sensation was both warm and unexpectedly pleasant only confirmed that McClaren wasn’t winding me up. A huge grin erupted on Kirk’s face – like the Joker – and he endorsed my manly act by patting me on the back. I had done the right thing.

I had been validated and vindicated. I was one of the lads.

Apart from one near-death experience while performing capsized drill in my canoe, I quite enjoyed the water sports. It aroused in me a previously dormant aptitude for windsurfing. Indeed, I contrived to stay upright on the board for longer than anyone before falling ingloriously into the soup some distance beyond a safety area that had been marked out, inadequately I thought, by half a dozen fluorescent pink buoys the size of spacehoppers. When the instructor dashed for his jet ski and fizzed urgently across the mile and a half of lake to retrieve me, I thought he was coming out to offer his congratulations. Instead, he hauled me onto his vessel, screaming hysterically. I couldn't make him out because my ears were full of water, but I guessed he wasn't saying that I'd be presented with the windsurfing medal at the end-of-trip prizegiving.

But if I was disappointed at that, I was mortified when I returned to the changing hut. All the lads were already inside. They had peeled their wetsuits down to their waists and were exhibiting a collection of clean, porcelain-white torsos. That familiar grin had spread itself across McClaren's face, though now I saw it in an altogether different context. The Joker laughed. I felt ill. I knew what was coming.

'Get them off, Big Jessie.'

I tried not to cry. I really tried. You didn't argue with McClaren, not when he had an audience. I duly unzipped my rubber suit and my poo-greased belly popped out like a pea from a pod. I looked like someone had varnished me with iodine prior to a Caesarean.

The hut became filled with a loud mixture of laughter, derision and disgust. So much hollering that

the windows fogged up. Even Miles Huggins was laughing and he had a hole in his heart.

'Get them *right* off,' said McClaren. He was clearly enjoying His Finest Hour.

I extricated myself from the wetsuit as fast as I could, pausing only to gag against the stench.

'Big Jessie's on a dirty protest,' yelled Huggins. He had tried to hide himself behind the big lads, but I clocked him. Fucking turncoat.

'This is Kesh, not Long Kesh,' goaded McClaren.

'What are you, a Taig?' asked Stephen Meeks.

'Well, he's got ginger hair,' said McClaren, completing the one-two with Steeky.

I felt immediately cold. Meeks had opened the cabin door. My thin coat of shit no longer provided insulation from the October air.

'There's no shower in here, shitface. You're going to have to make a run for the lake,' goaded Meeks.

The head boy was right. My only option was to dash for the water. I searched for a towel to cover myself, but someone had hidden my sports bag. Huggins turned his eyes to the ceiling (at least, he turned the one that was visible through his single clear lens) in an expression of mock innocence. I wanted to cut him and watch him bleed.

Meeks and McClaren started the slow handclaps. They had six years on the rest of us. They were supposed to be looking after wee lads like me. Instead they rejoiced in picking off the weak. Fucking cowards, the pair of them.

There was nothing for it. I cupped my hands over my balls and made for the lake.

I had scarcely run the length of a canoe when I realized that the girls had not yet retired to their hut to get changed. They were still collecting pebbles at

the water's edge. I froze in front of them. You could have heard a pin drop. And several handfuls of pebbles.

And then the singing started. McClaren and Meeks emerged from the hut, leading their choir in a radical reworking of 'Black Betty'.

I felt a familiar heat rising up from my cheeks, bringing the water in my eyes to a low boil. That's the problem with being fat, pale, and ginger. Embarrassment *shows*. There's no masking it. The blood races to your chubby little cheeks, engorging the capillaries till you look like you're storing two shiny red apples for winter. The slightest twinge of embarrassment and my face and neck would go crimson, then bright vermilion, before plumping for deep damask. To the nickname 'Big Jessie', my young detractors often appended the title 'Red Cheeks of Ulster'.

I was human litmus paper.

I stood shivering with the blood filling my cheeks and the silt filling the gaps in my toes. Unfortunately my facial capillaries weren't the only things becoming engorged. I could no longer contain my stiffening penis in my cupped hands.

I wanted to die.

Then an angel appeared. She opened her wings of brilliant white and accepted me in their embrace. Rather, Carmel McCaffrey appeared. She opened a soft, white towel and wrapped it round me.

I don't know why she did it. Why would she be bothered with me of all people? I never had the nerve to speak to girls, certainly not Carmel McCaffrey. She was way too intimidating. She was the tallest person in Year 1 and the only Catholic. While most of us were ten, she looked about twelve. She had tits. She smelt of sweat.

On the first day of term Carmel had stood in front of our class and told us how she was shot before she was born. Back then, her pregnant mother had marched from Belfast to Londonderry. She had set out with eighty marchers from City Hall and it took them four days to reach Derry's walls. But when they got there, the marchers were attacked by some off-duty B-specials and Carmel's mum was shot in the stomach. Mother and baby survived, but the bullet had lodged itself in Carmel's unformed leg. Her toes hadn't yet separated. She showed us the X-ray on the classroom window. It was mad. The bullet was a wee black spot no bigger than a wine gum. Carmel said that the doctors saved her life and so, when she grew up, she was going to become a nurse.

I guessed that was why she put the towel round me and walked me to the medical room in the activity centre.

I was shown to a shower so powerful that it near peeled the skin right off me. I was given antiseptic shampoo that smelt exactly like the stuff Mum used on Midge, our spaniel. It stung my eyes and got in my mouth but I didn't care because I had decided two things:

Carmel McCaffrey was going to be my best friend for ever.

And McClaren, Meeks and Huggins were going to suffer. Even, as it turned out, if it took me twenty-four years.