

## **Publisher's note**

The author has changed the names of various people in the story that follows and it is not intended that any such individuals should be recognized, criticised or otherwise referred to in a personal or real life capacity. *So You Think You Know Me?* contains a number of words that can best be described as Scottish slang, jargon or colloquialisms rather than standard English. The explanations below may assist any reader who is perplexed.

**broo** dole (i.e. social security or welfare payments)

**crabit** easily irritated, annoyed

**da** father (or 'dad')

**doubt (or fag doubt)** a cigarette end

**greetin** crying or moping

**hamesucking** 'battering' into someone else's home, what was also sometimes called 'breaking and entering'

**huckle** push around, especially unceremonious arrest by the police

**maw** mother

**sciff** throw

**shed** a wig, or hair that looks like a wig

**spurtel** thin or emaciated

**tablet** (as. e.g. in 'home made tablet') cake

**weans** small children

## CHAPTER 1

### An Education of Sorts

Life in Saltcoats for the Weavers during the 1960s, the decade in which I was born, was pretty much the same as it was for any other large working class family in the town—whilst there was never enough money to go round, to which I was reasonably oblivious due to my age at the time, periods of economic hardship appeared to be mixed with good times and bad times in equal measure.

Saltcoats is a town on the Ayrshire coast some 30 miles west of Glasgow with a population of approximately 14,000. Historically, the town derives its name from the traditional trade of boiling sea water to extract salt. There is a twelfth-century headstone in the cemetery of Kilwinning Abbey, three miles away, that refers to the neighbouring village of 'Suat Cout's'.

Although the salt mines have long since gone, the town has a pedigree of sorts. Following some murderous land feuds, Saltcoats became more established in the 1500s when it was made a Burgh of Barony. Reflecting on the historical legacy and identity of the town over the years, it is nice to see that some traditions have not changed much as the murderous feuds are still re-enacted with vigour every Saturday night when the pubs are emptied.

For most of the last century, Saltcoats—with its beach, rail link to Glasgow and cheap accommodation—was one of the major holiday resorts for the city dwellers during their annual Glasgow Fair, which they affectionately termed coming 'doon the watter.' The advent of cheap package foreign holidays in the early 1980s, however, brought an end to this way of life and a further death knell to this increasingly deprived area, which had already suffered from the loss of traditional industries. Driven by sentiment, no doubt, a few hardened Glasgow punters remain loyal to their childhood resort regardless of the money, economics or weather. Fairly easy to identify, they are generally the pasty looking families running about the beach in the pissing rain stripped to their underwear.

Like most children starting school, my initial feelings were of unrestrained dread. My brother and sisters had been sent to this place and they were never the same from that point on, I thought to myself, as I was half-cajoled, half-tugged along by my maw to join that institution that would equip me to make my mark on life. As we approached the school, I noticed clusters of women congregated near the entrance, wearing faces masked by wear and tear, some showing thinly-veiled signs of relief; certain mothers were no doubt only too glad to get rid of their next batch, albeit temporarily, grateful for only having to run after the remaining two or three younger ones left in the house.

There we were, 36 weans leaving the womb for the second time—only this time there was no gas and air to ease our departure—abandoned, ignored, and deserted. Spic and span with our new-to-us, vaguely over-sized clothes which had been washed and starched, to movement-restricting dimensions, for the start of a new campaign; I was blissfully oblivious to the fact that I was sporting the second-hand clobber of my elder brother. That said, I was certainly not the worst—some weans were frogmarched into class with their clean but threadbare, non-gender-specific clothes hanging from their backs. In the coming years, I discovered that the newness of returning to school after a hot sticky summer, was a great equaliser for weans whose wee bony knees were usually sticking out of their trouser legs the rest of the year round.

Through experience, no doubt, the mothers moved slowly *en masse* towards the classroom door, waiting on permission to flee the scene as we sat rigidly on the hard wooden seats following their every move with terror. ‘Come on, face the front ... face the front!’ the teacher shrilled in unison with her rapid hand claps. Miss Brown looked like an old witch, with her grey hair pulled tightly back against her head, emphasising her sharp features and leathery looking face, deserted by any external sign of inner warmth and compassion. ‘Sit ... sit ... sit ... come on quickly, let’s all be seated .... Let’s all be seated,’ she again shrilled, as if addressing a disobedient Labrador, in the high pitched nasal voice that only an elderly spinster, who had long since ceased to be captivated by the wonders of children, could perfect. Unable to reach the floor, our wee legs were dangling from the seats as we shrunk into ourselves in mortal fear of this scary old woman.

Having manoeuvred herself into pole position, I caught my maw heading up the charge of adults from the classroom without looking back and I knew from that moment that she was never coming back; it was obviously a ploy she had hatched up with the rest of my family and

she had no intention of returning for me. Christ, I would have to end up living with one of my grannies, or some other distant relative, or worse still, with the old witch woman! In shock, we sat rigidly, like the starched collars round our wee fledgling necks, staring at each other in horror.

'Ah want ma mammy!' snapped Nicky Hill first, abandoning all dignity in his hysteria, as he made a bolt for freedom, only to be caught at the door by the arse of his pants. Obviously prepared for such dissent, Miss Brown's steely fingers were quickly wrapped vice-like around big Nicky's throat as she ran him back to his seat, confirming everyone's silent fears that they were indeed placed here as a consequence of some misdemeanour that had gone unpunished—until now. 'Now sit and hold your tongue, boy,' she hissed as if trying to maintain an element of professional composure. 'You're no ma mammy,' Nicky gargled as he struggled to free himself from Miss Brown's tightening grip, before changing to a more familiar tack and shouting back, 'Get aff me, ya auld bastart!'

Mesmerised, we sat quietly aghast at this overt display of kamikaze rebellion as Nicky twitched and thrashed defiantly under Miss Brown's stranglehold. 'Ah want ma maw tae,' echoed wee Johnny Grant, his bravery in the face of this nightmarish scene truly awe inspiring. 'So dae ah,' cried another reckless infant, uniting the full class as it swiftly grew to a crescendo of 30-odd screaming weans. The ones who cried loudest were dragged unceremoniously by the collars and, with their sparrow-like legs in overdrive, were shunted down to the desks at the front of the class, where Miss Brown could poke at them more conveniently with her unnaturally long, and unexpectedly painful, fingers. As if on a broomstick, she singled the rest of us out, one at a time; her darting, beady eyes picked up every movement, every sound, before she swooped in on her prey, giving us all a painful introduction, if not rapid education, as to what lay ahead. Welcome to primary school; welcome to life.

Having been protected by the innocence borne of my relatively sheltered early childhood, I have little recollection of life before I started primary school other than shamelessly stumbling around the garden in my sister's ill-fitting navy knickers which gathered around my chubby, grazed knees. My maw was there to pick me up when I fell, to feed me when I was hungry, to warm me when I was cold and, of course, to love me when I needed love. I also recall being held closely to her bosom during a bout of illness, in pain, but feeling safe and secure as she rocked me back and forth to the hum of a sweet gentle lullaby. In my formative

years I quickly became accustomed to the order of things and knew that younger siblings were for slapping and older ones for swearing at.

The idealism that characterises my early memories of my family does not extend to my da who, on the other hand, did not seem to show the same emotional involvement. Rather, from my earliest years he always appeared to be withdrawn and distant, offering no physical contact that I recall. I don't know whether this was just a general reluctance on his part to become involved, or whether he perceived this to be outside his masculine role or gender. Significantly, however, when I was around six years old, an older wean in the street pulled my hair and, as weans do at that age, I ran towards the house to find my maw, crying hysterically at this unprovoked act of sheer wickedness, only to be stopped abruptly and unexpectedly by my da at the front door. 'Whits the matter wi' you?' he asked grabbing my arm firmly and twisting it uncomfortably as I came to a sudden stop. 'Th ... th ... th ... that big boy keeps pullin ma hair,' I spluttered between heart-wrenching sobs, to which my da remained resistant. Turning me round and pushing me from the door he said, 'Never mind greetin like a wee fucken lassie, smash a brick ower his heed and he'll no' come near you again.' Unable to find a brick, blinded as I was through my tears, and feeling a wretched failure, I sat crying on the front doorstep until my maw returned from the local shops.

I still don't know if it was coincidental, or an executive decision, informed by some type of manly expectations, but concerted efforts were made in the following months to toughen me up. My da's Uncle Jimmy and his wife, an elderly couple from Yoker, in Glasgow, would visit us occasionally and during one such visit I was taken out to the back garden by Uncle Jimmy. He had an artificial limb as a consequence of a construction accident and to my horror he pulled his trouser leg up in front of me, exposing the unsightly wooden leg and proceeded to manipulate the knee joint to allow him to bend down on his knee. As if this sickening display wasn't enough, for my young mind to digest, he then bizarrely instructed, 'Right, punch me in the face as hard as you can.' Standing, disbelievingly, before him I could detect a foul smell from his breath which I would discover in later years was stale alcohol. 'Come on ... as hard as you can,' he repeated with an air of impatience. 'But ah don't want to,' I replied innocently confused as to the purpose of this game. 'Make a fist and smash it hard,' he repeated, 'this is how you learn to fight.' At this stage, I had no particular yen towards learning to fight but I was not openly defiant towards adults and particularly not family

members, so I meekly slapped his face, which in itself felt strange and unnatural. 'Aw come on, ur you a wee lassie or somethin,' he laughed as I stood fidgeting before him, embarrassed and self-conscious. Again I slapped him. 'Harder,' slap, 'harder,' slap, 'harder,' slap. 'Make a fist ... come on harder ... hit me like a man.' Starting to cry out of frustration, but spurred on by a longing to have this whole ugly episode come to an end, I made a fist and punched him in the face as hard as I could. Punch, punch, punch, 'That's better,' he said in approval as my small fist hammered away with all its might, disappearing into the creases in his big fleshy face, as my tears made dirty tracks down my own. Although I earned approval from Uncle Jimmy, not everyone was as enamoured with my newly acquired skill which I proceeded to demonstrate with an unreserved enthusiasm. Within a short period of time, I was made to stand in the corner of the classroom many an afternoon for punching other weans during playtime scuffles.

Uncle Jimmy's form of education clearly did not lend itself to the regimented orderliness and sterility of a Catholic education and there was I, the third youngest in a family of six and fourth in line to be processed through the Catholic conveyor belt. Although my mother would classify herself as Protestant and my father as Catholic, my parents were never really religious; their classifications tended more towards a tribal division reflecting decades of inherited tradition, as both of them were non-practising. This did nothing to prevent them from putting us through the Catholic milestones of Communion and Confession, however, as a means of securing our religious identity as opposed to any internalised belief that this would ensure our salvation.

The affiliation to specific denominations did in the eyes of some people, however, serve a more meaningful and important purpose in as much as it distinguished you clearly from the other half of the sectarian divide. Living on the west coast of Scotland during this period you were either Catholic or Protestant; one or the other, which for some was less of a devout association with one religion and more a collective sense of distrust for the other and a justification for abuse and intolerance. That said, the Catholic Church was not totally without its memorable impact on me as a child, as the first adult to assault me ever was the local parish priest, when I was playing with my pal, Johnny Grant, in the chapel car park at age of seven.

Father Garland was a large ruddy faced man with snowy white hair and he had been our parish priest for as long as I could remember. As he possessed the power personally to save me from the damnation of Hell,

should I warrant that journey in later life, I was always overtly courteous to him as a young child.

In quite literally glaring contrast to the vows of modesty normally associated with his ministry, Father Garland had treated himself to a brand new, bright yellow, Volkswagen Beetle car, complete with standing boards sporting from the sides, similar to the ones that gangsters hung off and shot at the police cars in hot pursuit in old American gangster movies. Despite my youth, I still considered this a strange choice of car for a priest, with its bohemian image born from its association with the hippy love generation, as it sat, dazzling, in pride of place, right in the middle of the chapel car park.

When we collided with this somewhat overindulgent display of car ownership on one of our aimless childish jaunts it was, of course, far too much to resist for Baby Face Weaver and Bugsy Grant, as we jumped onto the standing boards and began bobbing and weaving to avoid the imaginary bullets, lost in the innocent abandonment of play, only to be wrenched back into reality as fat fleshy fingers suddenly curled tightly round my neck like a coil and yanked me off the car. Before I could even begin to understand what was happening, Father Garland, who by now stood towering over me, slapped me hard across the left ear. With my ear stinging and still unable to comprehend what I had done to cause the wrath of this pious agent of the Holy Institution, I stood momentarily motionless in disbelief, as if the decision to condemn me to eternal Hell had been finalised. With the veins almost bursting from his neck he launched into a volley of abuse at our heathen behaviour in his thick Irish accent, 'You little scoundrels, do you have no sense of decency? .... If I see you here again you'll get another belting, so help me God!' Backing out of striking distance, Granty turned and fled for his life as I stood still, with tears in my eyes, rubbing my ear. 'Ya big fat swine!' I shouted at him, unable to control my hurt, anger and surprise any longer, at which I turned and followed wee Granty at great pace amid a rant of profanities. Anger had long since turned to fear as I lay in bed that night crying as I contemplated my mortal fate but, as this did not materialise in any concrete way in the succeeding years, my fear of damnation eventually subsided, and, some three or four years later, me and Granty settled the score with Father Garland.