

1. The Way to Learn Hard Lessons

The white van pulled up outside the warehouse; a high pitched squeal indicative of dirty brakes. A fine mist of rain hung like grey net curtains, and the clouds obscured any hope of celestial illumination. The headlights split the dark dampness; moisture swirling, glinting and twisting in the beams as if held inside two, recently shaken, elongated, snow globes. This brightening was brief, and the removal of the ignition key soon restored the murk.

What looked like a human wardrobe tumbled from the driver's seat. Pulling his collar up against the weather, he closed the door behind him, and loped round to the back. Like most white vans it was not as white as it might be, thanks to the detritus chucked up from the road. Some jokers had scrawled messages in this layer of grime. Hints like; 'Wash Me!', and 'Also available in white'. One particularly comic correspondent etched 'If only my wife was this dirty!' only for another to inform him that 'She is when she's with me!'

The bipedal furniture pulled the body of a young man from the back of the van. He slung it over his shoulder as easily and as casually as if it had been an empty jacket. Paying no heed to the messages, he carried the unconscious coat into the warehouse.

The warehouse itself was unremarkable - a framework of discoloured girders with paint flaking off in hefty chunks, filled in with grey breeze blocks, and topped off with waves of corrugated iron. A large, steel, roller-shutter door accessed a concrete loading bay: rusting, and long-since-useless block and tackle, hung from the roof above. Various deposits of post-industrial waste were scattered across the floor, but in the centre an area had been cleared. The lighting was clearly of a temporary nature. Three, small but powerful floodlights, mounted on tripods, and seemingly plugged into the mains: no doubt bypassing any requirement for an estimated meter reading or a standing order. Clearly, this building had once been a hive of small, independent, mercantile activity. Today it was again - although almost certainly not in the same field of commerce.

Once inside, the walking wardrobe tipped the lad into a chunky, high-backed chair, bolted onto the floor in the clearing. The boy wore a white t-shirt under a blue tracksuit top, blue tracksuit trousers, and white trainers. Heavy leather straps circled his wrists and ankles, biceps and thighs, chest, lap, and neck, binding him tightly into the chair. Blood oozed from a fresh welt on the back of his shaven head: a cosh the most likely culprit. His breathing was slightly erratic but did not seem to signify his impending demise.

The van-driving furniture joined two other human fitments, waiting for him to deliver his cargo. A gentle hubbub of murmured conversation struck up between these three, broken occasionally by booming guffaws of laughter. Before long, they were indulging in what all men inclined towards the supreme vanity of body building do - they were comparing musculature. Look at my biceps, triceps, abs, tabs, and cabs - are they impressive, or are they impressive? Who gives a shit? Everybody knows that to get so inhumanly big they needed to eat about six sheep a day, and inject so much steroid that, eventually, their gonads would resemble a nematode attached to a walnut. Oh, and they would probably die of heart failure by age forty. These same types find it amusing to refuse perfectly harmless kids entry to nightclubs. Clubs their friends have just gone into, thus leaving them stranded and alone in city centres for all manner of despicable things to happen to them. Massive insecurity, inferiority complexes, and

homo-erotic yearnings concealed behind a wall of muscle and sinew, machismo, displacement, and tall story telling.

Then again, you might need somebody to intimidate, beat, or harass your enemies. You might require protection for you or your property (or for someone you cared about). If so, then these three hunks of artificially overdeveloped manhood would be your boys. But, these were *his* boys. His meanest, most ruthless, and morally bankrupt boys. Before the evening was out, they would admirably demonstrate all of those qualities, and perhaps a few less desirable ones to boot.

The building gave a metallic yawn as the roller-shutter door opened.

The car almost floated in, stopping a few yards from the chair. So quiet as to suggest the breath of its driver powered it - black, of course; Mercedes, of course; small countries' GDP for a price tag, naturally. The driver got out, but just how he managed to do that, or get in for that matter, was a mystery - even when the car concerned was like a super tanker with wheels. Perhaps he was like Alice, with bottles marked 'Drink Me' in order to alternately shrink and expand himself? Either that, or someone inside the car was helping to push him out, sitting in the passenger seat and using both feet. This behemoth looked like someone set out to create Mr T and Arnie Schwarzenegger's combined in-vitro-fertilised, bastard, no love lost there then, child... and succeeded. If the three apes making the preparations were gorillas, then King Kong was now in the building. He opened the rear offside door.

Generally, the Mr Bigs of this world are men who no longer do; they are men who have done for them. Guile, intelligence, entrepreneurial spirit, a silver tongue, and an ability to make (and keep hold of) mountains of cash. All qualities far more likely to see you atop the criminal hierarchy than lashings of mutton and anabolic, and a fondness for playing cruel, practical jokes on teenagers. Danny O'Neill may not have had the physical stature of baby Tarnie and co, but by Christ did those ruthless, beefy bastards cower in his presence.

O'Neill grew up in Easterhouse: amongst the toughest of tough housing estates in Glasgow. One of four children born to second generation, Irish Catholic, immigrant parents, his upbringing was hard and poverty-stricken. His father was an inveterate gambler, womaniser and alcoholic, who pretty much left his mother struggling to raise him and his three sisters on her own. Money, food, clothes and heat were in constantly short supply. These were not his Good Old Days. He despised being poor, malnourished, and cold, and despised his cockroach of a father for allowing his children's lives to be thus.

He was always likely to join a gang because every boy on the estate did. These estates were bereft of any other credible fulcrum of social cohesion for young men. The two main churches' relevance was relegated to providing reasons for partition or footballing allegiances; Huns versus Tims; Nationalists versus Unionists; Papes versus Proddies; Billy boys versus Fenians. They had long since lost their ability to galvanise or motivate them to follow the tenets of their respective takes on Christian faith. There was no iconic work place, like a pit, or a steel plant, to give them a shared sense of purpose or productivity. Indeed, work of any kind was in short supply. Therefore, so was money, and significantly, there were absolutely no leisure facilities. This was before the introversion and selfishness of drugs became the way to counteract the deficiencies of their lifestyles. People still hankered for collective goals and activities. At a very basic level, gangs gave young men something to do. They offered the promise of comradeship,

status, recognition by their peers and exhilaration. For some, gangs meant protection, while for others they would tender nothing more than constant anxiety, brutality, humiliation and even death. They could be as formally constructed as any national army, or as anarchic as the most dissident of terrorist splinter groups. The most ambitious boys on the estate looked to the militarily minded collectives. These gangs offered the structure and opportunity to be recognised; to be unconditionally obeyed. Danny O'Neill was the most ambitious boy any of them ever encountered.

Tough, certainly, but not the toughest of the tough in his gang by any means. However, this was not crucial since, not only was O'Neill the most ambitious member, he was also the smartest and most ruthless by some considerable margin. He joined the most dreaded and pitiless gang with the most militaristic set-up. Rising to the very top came via all the usual routes for promotion in a criminal corporation: drugs, prostitution, loan sharking, embezzlement, robbery, and murder. As he began to make larger sums of money from these endeavours, he also invested in concerns with varying degrees of legitimacy. Property, shares, restaurants, shops, and art. The invaluable ability to manipulate and lead others into doing his bidding was apparent and invoked from a very early stage. Many things marked him out from the average gang member, but an utter lack of compassion, and the relentless pursuit of retribution when wronged, were key components in his success.

At the age of nineteen he committed his first murder - that of his spineless, drunken father. His mother never knew he was behind it. At least, if she did, she never faced it or confronted him with it. He felt nothing other than deep satisfaction at removing the worthless parasite from appropriating oxygen under false pretences. He lured him to a meeting in a pub, plied him with enough drink to render him comatose, and left him in his car with the engine running and a pipe attached to the exhaust. To the police it was a straightforward suicide, but to all those in the know, it sent out a strong and unambiguous message. This was someone with a sense of purpose and ruthlessness that went way beyond the railings of your average hormonal teenager. This was a young man that you'd be well advised not to cross, or in any way cause him to make you the object of his ire.

Despite a public profile in the East End higher than most TV stars, and amassing a fortune of eye-watering proportions through illegal means, he consistently avoided imprisonment. In fact, he had never been successfully charged with anything that stuck, or found himself on trial. Nemesis did not even begin to describe his status in relation to the Strathclyde Police Force. They tried every tactic they could, but as he became more successful and notorious, he actually spent less time at the criminal coalface. Operations were directed through his chain of thugs and lawyers - some of whom played dual roles. Getting to the actual man himself was easy. Proving he was the one who did it, was a lot harder.

He held no particular preference when it came to how to make money and wield power. To get where he was, he quickly ditched any sense of empathy or sympathy. Better still, he was almost certainly born without such cumbersome baggage. This unburdening removed the angst that those initial, moral, gangster dilemmas would elicit in most - until they dulled themselves to it. It would always be difficult to judge, in any individual, whether nature or nurture played a bigger part in shaping who they were. However, from an early age, spurred on by the example (or genes) set to him by his father, Danny O'Neill appeared disinterested in any negative effects his actions might have on other people. No matter the conclusions drawn in any intellectual debate as to the origins of his disposition, it was fair to say that if ever a man was born to profit from the misery of others, then this was he, and that lad in the chair was about to be very miserable indeed.

Wearing an immaculately tailored, black suit, a mauve, open-collared shirt, and black shoes, he stood about five feet seven tall, and was somewhat stocky in build. Although shaven headed, his face was most unlike the classic gangland hard man. No boxer's nose, no scar from eye socket to chin, no mono-brow. In many ways, he looked like a well-dressed businessman making a visit to one of his factory outlets. Reaching into his inside pocket, and pulling out some Gauloises, he tapped the slightly crumpled soft packet in the obligatory manner seen in all good French movies. After removing one and placing it purposefully between his lips, Tarnie stepped forward and lit it for him. He dragged deeply, and after holding in his breath for a second or two, the exhalation was deep and through both nostrils. It almost gave him the appearance of a cartoon bull. The packet returned to the pocket.

In response to some less than obvious order, Bully Beef number one walked over to the lad with a small vial, popped the top off it, and waved it under his nose. The boy responded by shuddering awake, spluttering and coughing, as if choking on some liquid that inadvertently went down the wrong way. It took him a minute or two to gain some kind of lucidity.

'Right son, awake are we?'

His voice had a duality. Gravel, lain on top of deep, heavy loam. It was a voice that imbued the authority, fear, and respect its owner commanded with rumbling resonance. There was an almost hypnotic, serene, quality to it too. Although, this soothing timbre would be unlikely to provide compensation for the consequences of having fallen foul of said owner.

'You appear to have gotten yourself into a spot of bother.'

He inhaled the Gauloise deeply once more. This time, the exhalation formed a chimney of smoke that chuffed upwards, disappearing from sight as the glow from the temporary lighting dissipated in the roof space. His mannerisms were those of someone supremely calm. Someone in total control of the situation. This was certainly not a man inclined to rashness or nervousness

'Now, I want to make something quite clear from the outset. I won't accept bein lied to. I also won't accept any sense of divided loyalty. When I ask you a question, I expect a quick, truthful answer - bullshit free and unambiguous. Do we understand each other?'

The boy in the chair clearly began to grasp the gravity of his situation. His eyes darted about as if careering around inside a pinball machine and his mouth trembled uncontrollably. A pointless and short-lived struggle against the straps pinning him to the chair ensued.

'MMM Mr OOO O'Neill, I, I, I...' he stammered weakly.

'Shoosh now son. You can speak when I tell you to. I take it your answer to my first question was yes?'

He tried to nod but, with his head locked in place, his affirmation was limited to a grunt.

'Now, I hadn't finished tellin you what was gonna happen here.'

As he was speaking, Bully Beefs two and three retrieved a contraption of some sort from the gloom beyond the floodlights. They began to assemble it as O'Neill continued his address.

‘I’m gonna ask you three questions. The answers you decide to give, will determine just how bad things are gonna get for you.’

The boy started to sob gently now. Clear, watery, snot dripped from his right nostril and he sniffed disconsolately.

‘I have to point out to you, that this is merely about damage limitation. You know you’ve betrayed me, and I know you’ve betrayed me. I want to know the extent, and the actions I’ll need to initiate to put it right. I don’t want excuses or any other wasteful outbursts. I want the truth, the whole truth and nothin but.’

The boy nodded as best he could, as the BB’s wheeled forward the contraption, and manoeuvred it in front of the chair. It looked like a cross between a crane, a welder’s bench, and one of those metal frames they screw into the heads of neck-break victims. At this point, the terror contorting his face, entered the boy’s bladder, and forced its contents out into his trousers.

O’Neill shook his head and sucked in his breath. To the uninformed observer, it may even have appeared that he did this with some semblance of commiseration.

‘That must be a bit uncomfortable and embarrassin, but don’t worry about it. I’ve seen it all before. A lot bigger and harder men than you have done that when in a similar predicament.’

The BB’s sniggered like naughty schoolboys discovering the joys of double entendre.

‘Fuckin grow up!’ snarled O’Neill.

They instantly composed themselves, and continued with the task in hand.

‘Where was I? Oh, that’s right, I was gonna tell you about this thing.’

He dragged deeply on his cigarette one last time, and stubbed it out in the container provided with almost balletic timing and co-ordination by Tarnie junior. It was this sort of caution and attention to detail that kept him out of jail. Many the lesser and less astute man would have stubbed it out on the floor. However, with modern DNA techniques, it would provide a marker of his presence, should the police feel any need to visit the premises at a later date.

‘You see, on telly and in films and so on, torture is normally a pretty tame process. The good guy usually just gets punched, or maybe whacked by the butt of a pistol. Now and again, some light electrocution might take place, or a finger or two might get broken. Loads of things get hinted at, but nothin usually comes of it. You know fine well they’re idle threats coz there’s no point mutilatin or killin the good guy, otherwise the film grinds to an early halt - that and the censors tend to stop them showin anythin too graphic.’

He paused, as if listening far off for some distant sound, before resuming his speech.

‘Thing is, that doesn’t actually work all that well in the real world. People are usually not too worried about gettin the crap knocked out of them. They’re used to an occasional kickin and even broken bones

will heal eventually. It usually doesn't scare them enough to guarantee the truth. Anyway, you can end up knockin them unconscious or worse still, killin them, before you've got what you need. It just takes too long and the results are totally unreliable.'

The BB's were placing part of the thing around the lad's head. Semi-circular, about one inch thick, and looked as if it was made from tempered steel. They placed it across the meridian of his head from ear-to-ear and made some adjustments, tightening it close to the boy's scalp. The crane, securely fastened to the floor with a tripod of bracing struts, held this torturous tiara from above. A leather strap, hanging from the back of the steel band, had a buckle to fasten it to the back of the chair. This meant that the manner of his bondage would allow him absolutely no movement of his head whatsoever. He did not yet realise it, but that would be important.

'To get to the truth, you need somethin more troublesome to the mind and body than a beatin. That's what I developed this wee apparatus for.'

The sobbing became a wail.

'No, ppplease, MMMMr OOO'Neill. I'll do anythin, I'm sorry, I didn't...'

He was teetering on the brink of hysteria, but O'Neill calmly cut in.

'I'm sure I told you not to speak unless I told you to.'

Despite the panic sweeping over him, threatening to wrest all semblance of control from his emotions and bodily functions, somewhere deep down, his subconscious won a battle in the war for survival. It managed to convince his conscious self that compliance was his only chance of making it beyond the next few minutes. More strangely, that voice, which was as soothing as it was menacing, helped it in its campaign. The gentle, self-pitying, sobbing resumed.

'As I was sayin, this wee device I've had the boys put on you is designed to speed up the truth, and make sure I'm not here all night.'

'Question one. Who did you talk to?'

'I, I, I, didn't...'

O'Neill held up his right hand, his left remaining in his trouser pocket.

'Ok, before you continue down that route, let me just re-iterate for you once more, and for the final time. No lies, no divided loyalties.'

One of the BB's swung the next bit of kit into place. A kind of circular vice, placed around the boy's face, and secured to the metal bar behind each ear. Stepping back, he executed a swift, short, and distinctly hefty punch to the midriff.

The boy gasped for air, reeled from both the shock and the pain, and looked at O'Neill almost accusingly.

'Oh, I forgot to mention that beatin is still gonna be a *part* of your punishment. Particularly if you continue to make things difficult.'

'It was DI Smith, the one that speaks with a whistle,' the boy blurted breathlessly.

O'Neill recognised the name instantly, and alarm bells began to sound. Smith was a copper hell bent on making a name for himself - a gutsy, maverick, bastard with a real nose for the weak spots in his intended targets. Exactly the kind of policeman he had been very careful to avoid giving any encouragement to throughout his long and illustrious career. Avoiding the attentions of such men had kept him out of jail thus far. As much as it might please Her Majesty, he would not be at all chuffed to be taking up an extended residence in one of her more secure accommodations.

'Good, now we're gettin somewhere. Question two. Did you give him time and place?'

'Aye.'

The sniffing was almost constant now, but made little impact on the flow of snot.

'Question three. Was that the first time you've talked to him?'

'No. It's a few. Ten times maybe, I'm not sure exactly. I never tell him very much, I just do it for the money so I can buy gear, I wasn't thinkin straight, and I know I was a prick for doin it, but I've got a problem with drugs, and if you'll just give me one more chance I promise I'll make it up to you'

He was rattling like a cattle auctioneer on speed.

'Look son, I just wanted to get the info I needed on this policeman. I couldn't give even half of a fuck about your motivation or your problems. We've all got problems, but we don't all go grassin up our employers to the filth.'

O'Neill stood stock still, and pondered. There was a lot to think about. He knew what he needed to do about the whistling bobby, but he was considering his options for the boy. It would probably be best to just kill him and be done with it, but they had not planned a full clean up, or the proper disposal of his body. In any case, he was waiting for an opportunity to try out his new toy, and given the entirely appropriate circumstances, it seemed a waste not to see what it was capable of. He did not stand on the horns of his dilemma for long. He never did. Thinking decisively, on the hoof, and to tight deadlines was an essential skill.

'Question four. I know, I know, I promised you three questions, but I just wanted to ask you one more.'

He paused, rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and addressed the boy directly with both hands thrust deep into his pockets.

'Do you think you'll be talkin to the police again?'

'No, no, I promise I won't, I promise, please, I'll do anythin. You don't have to kill me'

O'Neill took his hands out of his pockets, crossed his arms in front of his chest, and cocked his head slightly to the left. He rocked back and forth a couple of times between heel and toe, with knees locked, and the segs in his shoes tapping metallically on the floor.

'Well, truth is son; you're right, I don't need to kill you to know you'll not be talkin again - ever. You see, I'm not particularly religious these days, but I do really think they were on to somethin with that eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth malarkey. As far as I'm concerned, I really do think the punishment should fit the crime.

'Right then, if you'll excuse me, my piles are playin up somethin rotten, so I'm gonna go and sit in my nice comfy motor.'

He said this with redundant and incongruent politeness. It seemed reasonable to assume that the boy did not give even the tiniest of jots about O'Neill's shitepipe. Or the apparent surfeit of roughage in his diet. Particularly as he just spent the last fifteen minutes terrorising him, and was about to unleash some unspeakable punishment upon him. Literally unspeakable, as it turned out.

Turning abruptly, he walked back to the car, and climbed into the back seat again. Tarnie stood in front of the driver's door. O'Neill's blacked-out window gently opened, and he sparked up another cigarette.

With their master now sitting comfortably, they could begin.

BB 1 approached the boy with what looked like a set of pliers. BB 2 stood behind him and did something strange - he pinched his nose. BB 3 stood impassively by his right shoulder, ignoring the lad's whimpering and begging for mercy, hand resting on the crankshaft of the vice.

BB one grabbed the boy's lower jaw with his free hand and forced his mouth open. The jaw has a remarkably strong set of muscles attached to it, but the brute force being applied, combined with the need to breathe, meant number one held a distinct advantage. The pliers were rubberised to help them grip slippery objects. As soon as the boy's mouth was open wide enough, BB 1 grabbed his tongue with them, and pulled it forcibly forward and out. Number two let go of his nose and number three got to work - cranking the vice upwards. The boy was screaming, or approximating a scream given the position of his tongue and, best he could muster in the circumstances, thrashing wildly. His eyes pleaded pitifully, but it was utterly futile. The vice rose relentlessly, as he slowly, excruciatingly, bit off his own tongue. Blood began to ooze, and then spurt from the sides of his mouth, he gargled and choked, and snorted, pebble-dashing BB 1 with bloody snot. A crimson crescent slowly formed around the neck of his once-white t-shirt. After what seemed like an eternity, number one stepped backwards, holding the severed tongue in the pliers. The boy understandably fainted at some point during proceedings.

The window closed silently while Tarnie squeezed his vast frame back in behind the wheel. He gently exhaled, and the limo floated away.

'Now he really is a dumb fuck!' said BB1.

'That's a bit tasteless!' replied BB3 between the sobs and howls of laughter.

Once the hilarity subsided, The Three Muscleteers calmly dismantled the equipment, including the rather difficult task of removing the chair from its moorings in the concrete floor. They cleaned themselves and the area around where the chair had been, before bundling everything (including the lad) into the back of the van that one of them fetched from outside.

The shutter yawned once more and they drove off into the dark, leaving the warehouse just as unremarkable as when they arrived - save for four rather large bolt holes in the concrete floor.