

# **THE TURN-OF-THE-ROAD**

**Geoffrey Beattie**  
**Visiting Scholar, OCLW and Wolfson College**

We were the ‘turn-of-the-road gang’ in Belfast, that most territorial of cities with invisible peace lines separating the Protestants and Catholics. We were the *Protestant* turn-of-the-road gang. The Troubles were just touching distance away.

We would stand in a long row on a little strip outside the chip shop in Ligoniel. ‘Greasy Jim’s’, we called the chippie, blasting out its hot, fetid smells. The police would regularly drive past and move us on, but we’d nowhere to go. We lived in these two-up, two-down mill houses with no privacy, so you wouldn’t want to go home early, if you could help it.

I was ‘Beats’ in the gang, not Geoffrey (at home), and not Beattie, which is what they called me at school. Just Beats. Two personas really, maybe three.

Tampy was an outsider to our gang. The rest of us had grown up together, his family had moved up from the Shankill to Glencairn. He had a charisma about him. He arrived one night with his best friend Chuck. Tampy suddenly put Chuck in a headlock and started trailing him around the greasy pavement, for show. You could see the distress in Chuck’s face. His shoes were at an angle, skimming the pavement, he was trying to regain some balance, one shoe came off and ended up in the middle of the road. The spectacle went on forever. Eventually, Tampy pushed him to the ground, smiling broadly. Chuck got up, bleeding and filthy from the dirty pavement, and said he was going home. He went into the road to get his shoe. Tampy just shrugged. From that night on Tampy was with us; Chuck never came back. We were always wary of Tampy though.

He would turn up at my house always unannounced. One night he dropped a lit cigarette into the pocket of a boy from my school who had come to my house for some help with his homework. I didn’t see anything, Tampy told me later. The blazer went on fire on the boy’s way back home. His angry father

came back with the burnt out blazer. Tampy persuaded my mother that the boy was a secret smoker trying to blame others.

My brother had moved away, so I had the back bedroom to myself. I'd started pinning photos ripped from the music papers to the ceiling so they could hang down without having to touch the damp walls. My mother hated it and refused to clean the room. I had a red bulb to disguise its damp ugliness, to make it look cosy. My mother said it looked like a whorehouse.

My gang would ask me to 'mind' things for them in the bedroom, things they'd 'lifted', I didn't ask where they'd come from. One night, Tampy arrived at my house and pulled a small solid-looking object wrapped in an oily cloth from under his denim jacket and handed it to me. He told me to store it with the other gear. I said that I wanted to know what was inside the cloth. He said, 'you don't need to know,' I always remember those words, but I was insistent. He might have called it a 'stand-off'.

He snatched it back and unwrapped it. It lay there in his open hands, I have that image in my head now, as if it was some sort of offering. I'd never seen a handgun up close before. There was no background and no explanation. I didn't want to examine it or touch it. I knew I had to lie.

I explained that I couldn't hide it because my mother *now* cleaned my room. He just looked quizzically at me and made this little 'hhhhh' noise, which sounded like a cross between a blow and a hiss, as if he was clearing his throat of some unpleasant blockage.

'Don't lie to me, Beats, show me the room.'

So, I took him upstairs as my mother sat in the front room watching TV. He just stood there open-mouthed, gazing at the shards of newspaper hanging down, the cobwebs, the dirt on the window, the straggly curtains, the school books all over the place, with slips of paper sticking out of them, as if they had been kicked out of the way by someone leaving in a hurry. It all looked like some filthy crime scene.

He ran his finger along the wall and glanced at me. ‘You’re telling me,’ he began, ‘that she regularly cleans this hole?’ I swore that she did. There was a long empty, nervy silence.

‘My mother’s got very bad eyesight,’ I said eventually, stammering. ‘She does her best, she *tries*.’ There was another long unpredictable pause.

‘Jesus,’ he said eventually, shaking his head. I think that my response was so implausible that perhaps he thought it must be true. We went back down. Tampy glanced at my mother with some pity in his eyes. I’d never thought of him as empathetic.

‘Goodnight Mrs Beattie,’ he said, ‘I think you need glasses very badly, those eyes of yours will only just get worse if you leave them,’ and he went off into the night with the gun still up his jacket. I stood and watched him walk down Barginnis Street. My heart was beating so loud that I thought he might hear it. My mother asked what he was talking about.

That lie was my emotional break with the turn-of-the-road gang, I decided there and then to go off to university in England. Queen’s University in Belfast had always been more likely. At university, I learned that Tampy had been caught with a gun and sent to prison. I don’t know if it was the same gun or a different gun from that night. When I was at Cambridge, I learned that after his release, he was murdered by some fellow Protestants. His mutilated body was dumped in an entry in south Belfast.

I, on the other hand, had moved on.

