

It was a blinding bright windy day, and Royal Avenue was at a stand-still again. Several hundred marchers were packed together shuffling a few steps at a time with youngsters stepping on the backs of shoes. The chorus of '*cut-back/fight-back*' rang out.

'*Protest Against Tuition Fees*' was emblazoned on the red banner which rosy-cheeked Kiera struggled to keep a grip on. Jack synchronised her footsteps with Kiera, Bart walked beside them playing Shay's tin whistle off-key. City Hall came into sight and marchers streamed onto the pavement. The police ordered them back onto the road. Constable Corbett met Bob's gaze and doffed his cap. Bob returned the gesture. The occupiers made sure to be near the front of the crowd but they were bunched tighter in the bottleneck before Royal Avenue met Donegall Square. Cat and Fred waved their placards which read, '*Save EMA.*'

'We march today in defiance!'

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'Of cuts to the Educational Maintenance Allowance!'

The police had cordoned off Donegall Square and Chichester Street and officers lined the partitions. The measure made no difference to the drivers of the black cabs in the rank on the other side of the cordon. Some honked their horns. Others just smoked and watched, intermittently spitting on the pavement. There were two police cruisers there and two more on the other side of City Hall. There were three large land-rovers as well and some forty officers wearing bulky jackets, radios and hand-guns. Leon eyed them up with suspicion. Mary and Joe eyed up Leon with suspicion. A small raised platform had been positioned in front of the main gates where Gary spoke into a megaphone.

'It's vital we oppose the cuts to student access. Westminster has told us it will carve up tuition fees depriving the poorest of higher education. We're going to hear from a few speakers today...'

Over Writer's Square swallows chased one another. Punctuated splashes of rain water fell off the top of the marquee and Tall Paul watched the cars go by. Dewey-eyed, he looked into his cold tea. Padraig's head was bundled up in his coat. He let out a four beat snore. Galway John looked up from the book he read to the Christmas tree, wondering if he should take it down in case it fell and damaged someone. It was more bother than worth to tinker with right now, and he continued flipping through Daniel's tome on designed agricultural ecosystems. A pigeon grunted as it stared at the ground outside the orange dome tent.

At City Hall Miriam, wiry, with mousy brown curls, stepped onto the platform. She looked over the thousands of demonstrators and held onto the megaphone, tightly, to balance her nerves.

'This week *Queens' Students Union* are to meet with the European Commissioner for Human Rights. They will discuss how the

proposed cuts are going to affect children and young people. In scrapping the Educational Maintenance Allowance in England, the coalition government has threatened a whole generation eager to learn.'

Miriam's voice had become hoarse and she coughed to clear her throat before continuing.

'Abolishing the EMA will make young students here vulnerable to homelessness. It will put them at risk to mental and physical illness. Thank you for coming here today to signal your opposition to it.'

The crowd applauded as Miriam stepped off the podium. She exchanged a few words with Gary before he took up the megaphone.

'Thank you, Miriam. Please talk to Miriam and your other student representatives if you're concerned about this. It is not a done deal. The devolved Welsh and Scottish governments are continuing the scheme. We need Stormont to finish their review and follow suit. Make your voices heard. Call or write to your MP. There are members of Occupy Belfast here with information and sign-up sheets to keep you updated. So talk to them after, or at the camp or the SU. Thank you all and have a safe journey home.'

Hands clapped and mouths cheered and then another round of chanting before the police let a few at a time out of the bottleneck. Cat and Fred had brought the sign-up sheets Gary mentioned and realised they ought to get closer to the front. Fred apologised as he squeezed between the bodies.

'Pardon me, thanking you, excuse moi, coming through.'

Officers broke up Gary's conversation with Miriam and Shay as a tide of people moved in, keen to get out. Levin held Eoghan's placard as he searched his pockets for a pen and his own sign-up sheets.

'You all need to move back,' yelled an officer. 'You and your party need to be elsewhere.'

'Everyone back!' said Gary.

Sergeant Barker was beside one of the police land-rovers and Gary called over to him. 'We need some room! Everyone back!'

Inspector Tarbard made strides towards Gary. 'I need you back from the railings,' he scowled.

Eoghan looked at the other protesters stuffed together with nowhere to go. 'Fucks sake.'

Gary raised his hands to signal people to spread out. A few officers moved into the crowd. Miriam and Shay were backed towards the van.

'I've asked you three times now,' said Tarbard. 'If you won't comply --'

'There's nowhere to go,' shouted Kiera.

'Maybe you all should move,' yelled Cat.

Someone fell. Two officers lunged at Gary. An arm tightly grabbed his. Constable Louse put his arm under Gary's, and pulled. He let his body go limp. They began to drag him with his shirt and jacket pulled above his stomach. Kiera ran forward and grabbed Gary's leg.

'Shame on you,' yelled Jack.

'Let him go,' yelled Cat.

His left shoe came off. Cat grabbed Gary's leg. Joe went in to help Kiera. Gary was swinging like a hammock in a storm. His other trainer had come off. Kiera was screaming.

Daniel pushed past Eoghan, towards Leon and away from the scuffle.

Levin pressed forward in time to see Inspector Tarbard enter the tug-of-war over Gary.

'I am arresting you under the Public Disturbances Act and --'

'Bastards,' someone yelled.

'Stop it!'

'-- And the charge of resisting arrest.'

'Ah ballix,' snarled Sergeant Barker.

Barker and two other officers rounded on Cat and Kiera, pulling them off Gary.

Barker reached out to Cat. 'That's enough. You'll have to come with me,' he said.

She saw another officer drag Kiera away. She jerked her arm away from Barker. His colleague grabbed Cat roughly. She went limp.

The crowd booed.

Tarbard put Gary's arms behind his back and cuffed him. 'On your feet, Mr. Carell,' he said.

Gary's shoe flew over the crowd and struck Tarbard on the ear. The crowd erupted.

'Yeeeeee-ohhhhh!'

Tarbard looked to the sea of possible perpetrators while Louse led Gary to the van. Kiera and Cat were being led inside too. People were screaming.

'You say cut back,' yelled Levin.

'We say fight back!'

'You say cut back!'

'Disperse at once!' yelled Tarbard.

'We say fight back!'

'Pigs! Where are you taking them?' yelled Bart.

'They'll be formally charged at Musgrave Station,' said Barker.

'Do you want to join him, sonny?' said Tarbard.

'No sir, I don't wanna,' said Bart.

'Musgrave,' yelled Levin.

'Musgrave,' yelled Eoghan.

Fred took up the fallen megaphone. 'To Musgrave!'

Under the slow drips off the front and rear marquees, Galway John leafed through a newspaper. Each photograph had a beard drawn on it. Tall Paul looked down at his feet and listened to the few passing cars. Pdraig set the kettle on the grate over the fire bin. The sticks and firelighters inside glowed but did not crackle or flame.

'How come my coffee's always cold five minutes after I make it?'

'Must be the temperature, Pdraig,' said Tall Paul.

Galway John rose and went into the back. He returned to his chair with the radio in his hand.

'Right. Let's get some dance tunes going!' said Padraig. Galway switched on in the middle of the BBC news.

'In the illegal trade in confidential information, private detective Whittamore admitted to having three hundred journalists as clients.'

Padraig danced, jerking his muscles, body-popping. 'Rupert Murdoch's going down. Down, down, down.'

'Other news now. A woman in Dorset has trained the ducks in her local park to ask rabbits out on dates. The rabbits which also live in the park, typically only show intimacy with other rabbits. However Mrs. Pebblewobble's work is far from conclusive.'

Seventy plus protesters chanted as they marched to the bottom of Chichester Street. Others made the five minute walk through back streets. They crossed over busy Victoria Street, turning left before the garden plaza at the law courts, and met upon a thin slither of pavement. The wall rounded Musgrave: eight feet of grimy white and above that twenty feet of diagonal bars of black, red, silver and grey. There was a window covered with a grille built into the wall but no-one was there. Levin and Fred counted off the names and faces to figure out who was being held. The land-rovers arrived five minutes after the protesters, having followed the one-way system all around the city. They parted to let their vehicles through the opening gate, booing and cursing. When those shutters finally closed over, Mary and Jack banged on them a few times. Bob called for them to stop. It wouldn't do any good. Corbett appeared at the window soon after.

Eoghan pressed his face against the grille. 'I want to report a bunch of unlawful arrests.'

'You need to step back and get off the road,' explained Corbett.

'The ones arrested on the student march have a right to have witnesses present,' said Levin.

'Only one person has been charged at this time,' said Corbett.

'Are you aware you've lifted a minor?' yelled Mary.

'Disgrace how you handled them,' shouted Leon.

'Please,' said Corbett. 'Stand back from the entrance and clear the foot-way.'

'Oh fuck off!' bellowed Leon.

On the pavement opposite, Bronagh's jeep screeched to a halt. Padraig and Tommie got out. They waited for the traffic to ease and crossed over.

'What happened?' asked Padraig.

Mary yelled at Corbett. 'Shame on you!'

'Free the students,' yelled Leon.

'Free the students wrongfully arrested!'

'Free the students!'

Timid Corbett backed away. Levin rapped on the grille but it was no use. Corbett was gone from the window.

The police land-rovers were known in local slang as 'meat wagons' and weren't so much road vehicles as small mobile jails. This one

was colder than the camp. Time crawled even though the siren blared overhead. It was partitioned into little cells so they couldn't see each other. They heard Gary comforting them, and someone sniffing.

Inside the yard, Cat counted ten of them. Miriam, Shay and Gary were all handcuffed. Kiera and others were not. They were led into a building at the back, one at a time through a turnstile, and through metal detectors. Their pockets were turned out and the contents stored in clip bags.

Cat was taken first, down a hall to a room with a small window. Underneath there was a desk, like an old school desk, two chairs, and a four-drawer file cabinet. The constable was a woman in her forties with a bony nose, but the rest of her face was soft and full.

'Could I have your name, age and address?'

'I already told the front desk.'

'Okay. Can you verify you are Catriona Kennedy, born 19th August, 1989, residing at 216 Falls Road?'

Cat nodded.

'Can you verify you were involved in an altercation leading to an arrest at City Hall, just after 3pm today?'

She looked down at the greasy floor and said nothing.

'You're not under arrest, Ms. Kennedy. This is only a caution.'

'If you've already made your mind up, I don't see why I'm here.'

'Your statement will help us to establish what transpired... Why were you there, Ms. Kennedy?'

She looked at the officer, her pencil poised on the lined page. Cat took a deep breath.

'I was there to demonstrate my allegiance to the social movement actively opposed to crippling educational funding by twenty-five per cent. As a student in higher education my livelihood and life choices are affected by the economical theft of the corrupt ruling classes at Westminster and Stormont.'

The officer sighed as she wrote.

'Did you obstruct the officers during the protest?' asked the constable.

'I don't believe I did obstruct them, rather, that I altered the flow of a draconian physical assault upon a community leader who sought to inform people about the right to an education without being bankrupted.'

Cat smiled inwardly, and waited for the constable to catch up.

'During the abduction and assault on the person of Mr. Carell, who was exercising his strict code of non-violence, I intervened, seeking to ensure the aforementioned community leader would not come to physical harm as he was man-handled by members of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and to re-attach his shoes and socks to restore some degree of dignity.'

The officer put down the pencil and handed the statement to Cat.

'Sign there please,' she said.

Cat was taken to a holding room where she was reunited with the others. Kiera was coughing and wheezing. Before Cat could hug her, she was called out for an interview. Kiera shrugged. Her face was pale behind the curls which had none of their red flash in the greasy amber light. The door closed behind her.

'They had me reviewing their version of events,' moaned Cat.

'They questioned me too. Same crap,' said Joe.

The room reminded Cat of the old bath-houses: a blue band along a white wall with no more to it than a jutting out thin steel bench. She sat beside Shay, who rocked compulsively and looked to the floor. She put her arm round him. He was freezing.

'Hey, hey. There's no need for that,' she said.

'Love, I'm tripping balls, and it's not good. Oh fuck. Oh fuck.'

Cat looked around the room. The students, Sadie and Miriam, were furious. Anonymous Michael was just bored. There were two kids she didn't know and they looked scared out of their wits.

'There's nothing to worry about,' said Joe.

'I've got priors. They're gonna find out and, fuck, I'm done,' confessed Shay.

'Tell them you're homeless and you're sleeping at the camp. They might not make the connections,' said Cat.

Shay pressed his hands, as if in prayer, tight against his temple. 'Am fucking done. What did they ask you? Tell me.'

'They just wanted to know what I saw there,' explained Joe.

'Same here,' said Cat.

'Am done, am done. Oh, Christ.'

'It's not an interrogation. They just want a witness statement,' said Joe.

'You can handle this,' said Cat.

'Just tell them there were a load of people and you couldn't see anything.'

'That's exactly what happened,' said Miriam. 'They snatched us up without any warning.'

'Right, right,' said Shay nervously.

'We didn't do anything wrong,' confirmed Miriam.

'See? Just tell them the truth,' said Cat.

Shay pondered on this, and added, 'Gary's been gone a long time.'

There was an icy silence and then the door opened.

'Seamus Berry.'

Shay let go of Cat's hand and stood up.

The station wall stretched around the corner to Ann Street. The pavement widened there, and there was a clearer view into the yard. Most remained by the gates on Victoria Street, close to the traffic. The light had gone and it was approaching rush hour. Cars muscled by or stopped in congestion with their fumes stinking out.

'You want a justice movement?'

'Hurry up and free the students!'

'We don't need no litigation!'

'We just want an education!'

Some of them honked their horns on seeing people lined in double file with placards. One guy, when he was sure the congestion was easing, wound down his window and called them communists.

'What are yous protesting about anyway?'

Mary banged on the grille in an un-characteristic fit of temper, screaming for them to let her Joe out. Tommie had to calm her down. Reporters set up across the road with their tripods and boom mics, not yet daring to venture closer. The number of protesters dwindled. Bob complained about the sciatica in his knees so Bronagh drove him back to the camp. Tommie tried to see in through the grilled window but it was black and empty. He turned around and faced Eoghan who looked weathered and brittle.

'I tell you what I do know, Eoghan. If those cunts hold them without trial the whole of Belfast will be down here. I'll be storming the fucking gates myself.'

Deirdre put herself between them. 'Okay. It's been little over an hour. Just wait. Maybe Levin will have got some answers,' she replied.

A few minutes later the side gate opened. Kiera and Levin exited. People cheered. Leon gave Kiera an almighty hug. She didn't speak. Padraig, Mary and others drew as close to Levin as they could.

'What's going on?' Deirdre asked.

'Good news and bad news. They're releasing the others but Gary has been formally charged.'

'They fine him?' Padraig asked.

'They're holding him overnight,' said Levin.