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Crime and Punishment (extract from 'Paper Run')

Tea-time, Saturday, I'm six years old. Dad
sends me down the steep stone stairs. (He needs
his evening papers, sports results.) The painted walls
are moist, inviting. My finger leaps
and, in crude capitals, forms the one word —
BUGER. This is the worst word that I know:
blacker than 'bloody', more sinful than 'shit'.
Laughter seeps from Mrs Glover's wireless,
and my heart beats like a kiltie's drum.
Coming back, the stair's grown darker. Yellow
gaslights hang like moons but, through the railings,
all has melted, disappeared, and fallen black.
I clutch onto my daddy's papers, but know
our kitchen's miles away. Who's down there
and what's down there? The man in the cloak
who waits at the window? Angels who'll come
to carry me away? I know the thick feel
of their feathery wings, and I know
they'll take me when I'm cold and naked.
I climb quickly, close to the wall. Down there
are growths with curling hair, and long thin hands
with grips like ice. There's fire. And hospitals —
and dreams: the book with the pages that won't stop
turning, and dawn with both my parents dead.
But I get back to our dark-varnished door,
push it open into the hall. Safe for a while,
I soon forget my finger printed BUGER.
But later my big brother tells, and says
that I can't even spell it. And as my dad
shifts in his armchair, behind his latest
Hibs and Hearts news, I have been found guilty.
Mum's hand is closing round her wet floorcloth,
and all of her has turned to thunder.

from *Paper Run* (2007)