



Source: Sabrina Tavernise, 'Sectarian toll includes scars to Iraq psyche', *New York Times online*, 17/09/07.

Tags: [Scotland](#), [streets](#), [violence](#)

Writer/s: [Ron Butlin](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

'Get over there with the clowns, sir.' A black-tinted visor is pulled down blanking out the man's face. He's wearing an all-black, military-looking uniform. He's shoving me with his heavy shield. 'Back, I said.'

'You'll be safe over there with the clowns.' Another all-black. A woman. A hint of friendliness, in the voice, but there's no mistake it's still a command. 'We'll be coming forward anyway. Any minute. You'd better move...' Another firm push in the chest, the woman's shield this time. "...sir.' Hard, see-through plastic with POLICE written across the front of it. As one, the black line takes a step forward, forcing me to stumble back.

From behind comes a harsh *rumble-grumble, rumble-grumble* like the clattering of small stones...the air is filled with the shrilling of blown whistles, wailing sirens, hundreds of men and women, shouts, chants. A helicopter's directly overhead, its engine a continuous roar, the blades *whup-whup* as it wheels round to continue circling.

'What's happening? I don't understand.'

As if I'd never spoken, the black-clad line of police takes another step towards me. Once again the policewoman's shield is shoved into my chest.

'Go over to the clowns. You'll be all right there.'

A wall behind me. A stone pillar.

'Back. Keep going back.'

A circle of clowns, fairies, a few Santas, most of them with painted faces, long hair—dancing to a piper's skirl and drone (red and green striped cheeks, a tartan kilt, bare legs and trainers). Some of the fairies have wings, the Santas' beards dangle loose in the heat.

This is Princes Street, the steps of the Royal Scottish Academy. The line of police is approaching, step by steady step, an all-black line stretching unbroken from one side of the street to the other. Behind the line, there's police on horseback, the horses with blinkers and protective armour. Behind them the wide, emptiness of Princes Street stretches into the distance, into silence. So ordinary, and so quiet.

No cars, no buses—no traffic at all. Pedestrians are strolling up and down the empty lanes, the central aisle. Shop windows are mostly boarded up but with signs 'Boots', 'HMV' 'Business as Usual'. In one direction the West End, the Castle...everything has the stillness of stage scenery. The stillness—a film set with extras penned in behind barricades, looking on while the clowns and fairies dance a ragged version of Strip the Willow surrounded by hundreds of police. Two rows of yellow police vans parked so as to block all exits.

The *rumble-grumble* is coming from a circle of drummers pounding, pounding...so loud I can feel it in my bones.

Having stepped halfway round the pillar I'm once again face-to-face with the police.

The street immediately below: a threatening emptiness between two lines of black uniforms, faceless visors, shields, weapons. Hanover Street's shut off by a ten-foot high barricade of steel mesh, behind it a crowd of normal-looking men and women. No clowns, no santas. On the other side of the street a crowd of onlookers are held

back by barricades. This is really Edinburgh? It's like I've suddenly found myself in a painted cut-out of historic buildings set around some kind of life-sized game...as if my city's past has been accelerated and will be over in a split-second, its meaning reduced to this one scene, this one confrontation: State power versus the clowns.

'This way.' A girl with a red-and-green striped face and short black hair has pulled me by the arm.

'Better if we're over there. Come on.'

'But what's going on? What's -?'

'We'll be stuck here and it'll get nasty. These are riot cops. Come on.'

I follow her down the gallery steps.

'We've got to get over to the other side.'

Directly in front of us is the slope of Hanover Street, now completely barricaded except for a narrow gap at either side of the wire netting. Some of the crowd are holding MAKE POVERTY HISTORY placards.

'COME ON.'

The stretch of Princes Street immediately in front is eerily still and calm. A line of riot police advancing on either side of it, closing the gap rapidly. Less than 20 yards remaining.

'COME ON. NOW!'

The clown-woman starts to run across the gap between the advancing police. I follow.

Halfway across the street I stop. The clamour around me is deafening—the shrilling whistles, drums, pipers, police and megaphones, ranks of advancing black uniforms. The tramp-tramp-tramp steady march of the police. Above, the *whup-whup-whup-whup* of the circling helicopter. Last time I'd been here was only a few days ago to have a small picnic in Princes Street Gardens. Ham sandwich, an apple, a half-pint of milk. I'd sat on one of the benches facing the castle while on the slope beside me children went rolling down the grass, laughing and shrieking.

'Don't turn into a fucking rabbit—these guys'll batter fuck out of you.'

The woman's grabbed my arm and is almost dragging me. The police are only a few yards away. They're holding raised batons.

'COME ON, FOR FUCK'S SAKE!'

I'm pulled through the closing gap. Next moment, we've squeezed past the metal barricade...and we run and run. Five minutes later, in Howe Street, we come to a world I recognise once again, and slow down. Tenements, shops with fruit displayed for sale outside in open boxes. A man going into a cafe to join his friends. A woman waiting at a bus stop.

'Looked like you'd frozen back there.'

She's right—I had. Of course I had, and so had the whole world.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ron Butlin.*