

## A SAFE JOURNEY HOME

‘James’

I was teaching in a State high school that was considered a Protestant school for Protestant boys. The school was set in a part of Belfast which was split into two main areas, controlled by different loyalist paramilitary groups (the UDA and the UVF). During the early 1980s, shortly after the hunger strikes when tensions were high, difficulties had arisen between the two paramilitary groups. This often meant that young people from one area were not welcome in the other. I had just finished my teaching duties for the day, and was clearing up some homework books, when a fifteen year old boy came to the door. I knew the boy well and he came over to the desk.

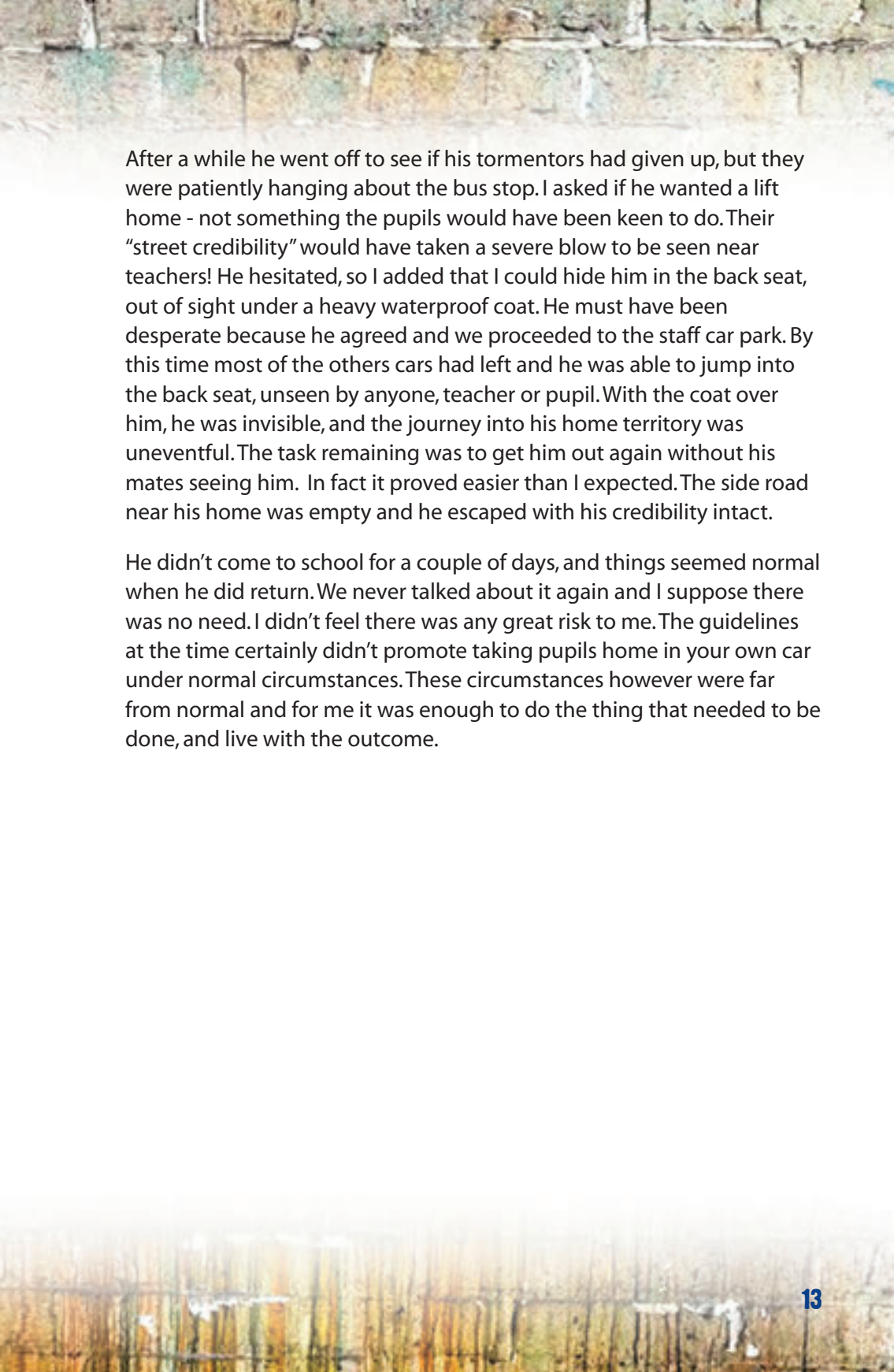
“They’ve come to get me, Sir,” were his first words.

“Who has come?” I asked.

“The UVF, they’re waiting at the gates.”

I didn’t ask why as he’d only have had to think up some story, so I told him to sit and maybe they would tire and go home. The boy lived in the UDA controlled area and to get home he would normally have taken the bus from in front of the school.



The image features a stone wall at the top, with a white horizontal band across the middle. The bottom part of the image shows a blurred background of trees with autumn foliage.

After a while he went off to see if his tormentors had given up, but they were patiently hanging about the bus stop. I asked if he wanted a lift home - not something the pupils would have been keen to do. Their "street credibility" would have taken a severe blow to be seen near teachers! He hesitated, so I added that I could hide him in the back seat, out of sight under a heavy waterproof coat. He must have been desperate because he agreed and we proceeded to the staff car park. By this time most of the others cars had left and he was able to jump into the back seat, unseen by anyone, teacher or pupil. With the coat over him, he was invisible, and the journey into his home territory was uneventful. The task remaining was to get him out again without his mates seeing him. In fact it proved easier than I expected. The side road near his home was empty and he escaped with his credibility intact.

He didn't come to school for a couple of days, and things seemed normal when he did return. We never talked about it again and I suppose there was no need. I didn't feel there was any great risk to me. The guidelines at the time certainly didn't promote taking pupils home in your own car under normal circumstances. These circumstances however were far from normal and for me it was enough to do the thing that needed to be done, and live with the outcome.