

SO
IT IS

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I wait for Whitey in the Regal Bar, sipping at a tonic water. Typical Loyalist hole, the Regal is, with portraits of the Queen and Norman Whiteside side by side on the walls. Usual crowd in too: stubbled heads, rolled necks, beer guts, tattoos. It takes two hours for Whitey to arrive, with his friends, and take the corner table. They're all nudges and winks, seeing the ride at the bar with the short skirt. He's not sure whether to take it serious or treat it all as a great geg.

'Can I buy you your next one?' he asks, as he approaches the bar.

'Would you be having one with me?' turning to him then so as my knees brush against him. He nods and we go to a table. Around the corner, out of sight. I play with his hair and pluck his shirt away from the nape of his neck. He has a tattoo there: a single screw. Inked so as you can see the detail of the thread. I ask him about it, even though I know rightly. His dad was a prison guard, died three years ago, in '93. I ask him about his job, even though I know that too. He's an RUC recruit, fresh out of school. I've done my homework. He can tell me nothing that I haven't already found out. I've scouted out the whole area. A man walking about around here with a sports bag over his shoulder would be pulled to the side. Not me, though. A woman's inconspicuous. Even months after, when someone lands up in hospital, they never suspect the ginger-haired girl who sells jewellery door to door. Why would they? For five

months I've been calling at Whitey's house, selling his mother earrings and necklaces. His photo sits on her mantel beside a cracked Charles and Diana wedding plate. I listen to her proud stories of her son. Over tea. Terrible thing, a mother's love.

'Get that pint down you and we'll get you a real drink, eh?' I says to him. Then I swallow the rest of my own. Leaning over I press my lips against his. Count the seconds – one, two, three. He'll be my third. Only two I've done before this one. Two in just under two years. Plenty of time between. Healing time.

Whitey's perfect. Eager enough that he'll not think twice before, green enough that he'll think twice about telling anyone after. As I stand up, I lift my handbag and the empty miniature tonic bottle.

'Wait there a minute,' I say, and make my way to the ladies'.

Aoife's mammy started to have problems with her mouth in the weeks after Eamonn Kelly was shot by the Brits. It started as a tingle, she told the doctor, like a cold sore forming at the corner of her lip, then it began to scour at her gums as though she was teething. It was when it started to burn, though, like taking a gulp of scalding tea and swilling it around... when it began to feel like the inside of her mouth and throat were nothing more than a raw and bleeding flesh wound... it was only then that Cathy Brennan phoned for the doctor.

In those weeks, as the pain intensified, she'd call Aoife or Damien over to her with a wee wave of the hand and reach into her apron pocket for a five-pence piece. Tucking it into Aoife's school pinafore or into the torn remnants of Damien's shirt pocket, she'd send one or the other scampering down the street to McGrath's on the corner to buy an ice-pop. All different colours, they were. Aoife liked the purple ones best, while Damien liked the green. Neither of them would ever even think to buy the orange ones. They would race home and give it to their mammy, who would clamp it unopened between her thin lips. Lengthways, like the flutes played during the

Twelfth parades. She would keep it there, between closed lips and beneath closed eyes, until all the white frost had melted and the inside of it had turned to brightly coloured juice. Then, opening her eyes and letting out a wee sigh, Aoife's mammy would lift it away from her mouth, snip the end of the plastic with the kitchen scissors and hand it to whichever of her children had run the message. Give it to them so as they could squeeze at the sugary slush with their fingers and suck on the end of it like a babby.

'How come Mammy needs ice?' Aoife asked her daddy.

'Her mouth burns her, love.'

'Why?'

'It's psychoso...' Shay Brennan lifted his daughter onto his knee, clearing his throat as he did so. 'It's all in her mind.'

'So her mind's burning her, then?' Aoife paused, waiting for her daddy's nod. 'Why?'

'It's what happens, wee girl,' he whispered, 'when you go touting to the peelers.'

'Is that right?' Aoife asked.

'Not a word of a lie. It's what happens when you feel guilty about turning on your friends and neighbours.'

Eamonn Kelly had been a neighbour of the Brennans for as long as Aoife, with all of her eleven years and ten months on this earth, could remember, but as far as she knew he'd never been a friend to either her mammy or her daddy. In fact, she'd have sworn by all that was good and holy that she'd heard her daddy talking of Eamonn as 'nothing more than Provo scum' at Mass one Sunday when he was having the craic with Gerry from down the way.

Still, it had fair shook her mammy when the Army raided the house, two doors down, where Eamonn was living. Aoife had seen it as well, even though Cathy had pulled her daughter's head in against her chest and kept it there with a firm hand. By twisting her neck a wee bit, Aoife had managed to squint out and see the whole thing. She'd seen the soldiers shouldering in the door without so much as a knock, even

though Sister Beatrice at school said it was rude not to. She'd seen Eamonn squeezing out of the upstairs window then, as the soldiers crashed and shouted inside, and jumping from the sill – feet-first like Hong Kong Phooey – onto the lawn below. She'd seen him landing, with his right leg part-buckled beneath him, and then springing up and hobbling out the garden gate. She'd seen the Saracen then, from further down the street, speeding down towards Eamonn and she'd heard the shout of 'Get your hands up, you bastard!' She'd seen him limp on for a pace with his gacky half-run, and then heard the shot. Then she'd felt her mammy flinch as Eamonn crumpled to the ground.

'Did you like Eamonn, then, Daddy?' Aoife asked.

'Ach –' he bounced his knee beneath her, so that she felt as though she were on a juddering bus '– it's not that I liked him, love, but he was a member of this community, is all.'

Aoife paused at that, her arm up around his shoulder and her hand nestled in at his neck. She didn't look him in the eye, as unsure of her footing now as Eamonn had been when he'd left those two footprints – one deep and straight, the other shallow and slanted – in the tiny square lawn, two doors down.

'Joanne from school said...' she started. 'I tell a lie – Joanne's brother said to her, and she says to me, that Eamonn was making bombs in that house.'

Her daddy shrugged. Aoife felt it up the length of her arm.

'If he was making bombs, though,' she continued, her thoughts stumbling on ahead of her, 'is it not right for Mammy to be telling on him?'

Another shrug and a settling of the bouncing knee. 'There were other people she could've talked to, Aoife,' her daddy said, 'if she had worries.'

'What if the bombs had blown up, but?'

'Eamonn was being careful, love.'

'What if –'

'I'll tell you this.' Her daddy lifted her down. 'These houses we've got, all in a row, they're near enough bomb-proof, so they are. Remember what your mammy told you, when you

were wee, about them windows – triple-glazed. As long as you’re under this roof, you’ll be protected rightly, OK?’

Aoife nodded.

‘Besides, a wee girl like you shouldn’t be concerning herself with bombs or any of that there.’ He smiled. ‘You and your mammy both, you’re too fond of the gossip.’

Aoife’s mammy hadn’t even said that much. It wasn’t like she’d come out and gone, ‘That Kelly lad on the other side of Sinead is making bombs for the IRA.’ If she’d said that, then there’d have been cause for all the ructions that had taken place since. Instead, all she’d said was that there was a powerful smell coming out of Eamonn’s house sometimes and that the windows, from time to time, did steam up like the wee window in the kitchen did when the dishes were getting washed after dinner. That was all she said, Aoife’s mammy, and every word of it the truth. Out on the doorstep, as the woman from the social came out from seeing young Sinead O’Brien and her two fatherless children. Aoife had been there, with her shoulder against the door-jamb, watching Damien as he plucked the black and orange striped caterpillars from the bush near the gate and set them down on the windowsill. He collected a brave amount of them, all slithering slowly across the sill and clambering over one another as though they’d a notion to make it to the other side before Damien’s grubby fingers could scoop them up again.

Still, nine days later Eamonn Kelly was spread out across the concrete with his arms splayed out to the sides, as though he was trying to make a snow-angel and hadn’t realised that it was springtime.

‘She works for the Brits,’ Aoife’s daddy had said to her mammy. ‘She’s a Prod and she works for the Brits and she’s from East Belfast. Come on to fuck, Cathy, you know that if you tell them the time of day they’re liable to take the watch from your wrist.’

Aoife wasn’t meant to hear this. She’d been sent upstairs to mind Damien after all the commotion had died down. She’d

crept back down the stairs, though, because Damien's room faced the road. As she sat on his bed and read to him from his Roald Dahl book – about George stirring in a quart of brown gloss paint to change the medicine to the right colour – her eye kept being drawn to the bloodstain, out in the middle of the pavement outside. Further down the road, beside the peelers' meat wagon, was another patch of liquid. It was as slick as the blood, but darker and with a swirl of colour at its centre.

'That's it over and done with, though,' her daddy continued. 'Enough with the waterworks. You're not to be blamed for what that scumbag was up to, Cathy, so don't be beating yourself up over it.'

He'd looked up then, Aoife's daddy, and seen her standing in the doorway, staring beyond him at her mammy, who lurched to her feet and felt her way across to the sink, using the worktop as a handrail. Then she set the tap running and twisted her neck in beneath it, making a bucket of her mouth. As the water passed her lips, Aoife could have sworn she heard a sizzle, like the first rasher of bacon hitting a hot frying pan.

Whitey is stocious by the time we leave the Regal. Absolutely full. That's how I need them, though, so I've no complaints. I lead him down Conway Street. Past the UVF mural with two sub-machine-gun-wielding paramilitaries guarding plundered poetry written in black and gold:

Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.

He follows me on down Fifth Street, not noticing that we've turned right and right again, not noticing that the flags on the tops of the lampposts are changing. Out onto the Falls Road. We've skirted right around the peaceline. Whitey seems happy enough, though. Like a dog following a scent, his eyes on me, his hands grabbing for me and, for the most part, missing. Leading

him on, past the garden of remembrance. More words in black and gold, but no poetry to them. Lists of the Republican dead.

Whitey stops under the first mural of the Hunger Strikers and mumbles to himself. As though he's trying to memorise the quote painted on it. Unlikely he'll remember much of anything from the walk home. He'll remember the rest of the night, mind. Pain sobers you up quickly. I steer him to the right before the second mural, the one of Bobby Sands MP. Down Sevastopol Street, then Odessa. Doubling back on myself. It was Baldy who set me up with the place. A safe house. Number forty-eight. The house beside has woodchip across the windows, fly-posters plastered on the woodchip and weeds sprouting from the posters. I check the other side, Number fifty. All the lights are out. I don't want there to be kids in next door when Whitey sets to squealing. That sort of thing can leave a kid shook for life.

'Whitey, love -' I step in close, searching his acne-scarred face ' - are you going to be of any use to me?' I reach a hand down to check. Something stirs. I smile. 'Good lad.'

Aoife and Damien were about equal with the ice-pop runs, purple versus green, when the steady supply of five-pence pieces stopped. Aoife made it home first that day, near clattering into her mammy as she slid around the lino-corner into the kitchen. Her mammy was on her knees in front of the fridge. The butter and milk and all were spread out across the floor, giving her enough space to get her head right in. Aoife caught on to what was happening. Rushing forward, she clawed at her mammy's cardigan until her head came out of the fridge.

'What are you at, Aoife?' her mammy asked, a frown on her as though she'd caught Aoife at the biscuits before dinner.

'You're looking for a goose!' Aoife shouted.

'A goose?' The frown deepened. 'What're you on about?'

'It was how Big Gerry's sister committed sue-side.'

'Suicide.' The frown disappeared. 'She'd her head in the oven, love.'

‘And she died, Mammy.’

‘That she did, Aoife.’ She was smiling now. ‘But a fridge wouldn’t do that to you, now.’

‘Well, why did you have your head in there, then?’

‘Because I’m burning up.’

‘You wanting me to run for an ice-pop, then?’

‘No, love.’ Her mammy shook her head. ‘I’ll call for the doctor, maybe.’

Aoife’s daddy had told her about Caoimhe McGreevy – Big Gerry’s sister – one Saturday afternoon when he had the smell of drink on him. She’d had to wrinkle her nose against the whiskey breath. Caoimhe’s husband had been put in Long Kesh prison for planting a bomb down near Newry somewhere, then Caoimhe got herself blocked on the gin and put her head in the oven so as she didn’t have to live the life of a prisoner’s wife.

‘Why’d she put her head in the oven, though, Daddy?’ Aoife had asked.

‘Why?’ Her daddy had thought for a moment, then chuckled. ‘She needed to see if her goose was cooked.’

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘And was it?’

‘It was, and she passed on up to Heaven, love.’

‘Can a goose do that to you, but?’

‘If it’s cooked, love, then it can. Only if it’s cooked.’

The doctor came during the day when Aoife and Damien were out at school and gave Cathy Brennan a wee white tub of pills that had her name neatly typed across the side. Their daddy warned them not to be touching them, said they were only for mummies and that if Aoife or Damien ate one then they’d find themselves frozen stiff and still, unable to move even their arms and legs.

‘Is that why Mammy takes them?’ Aoife asked. ‘Because she likes ice?’

‘What d’you mean, Aoife?’

‘Like, she says her mouth burns her, so are these pills to cool her down?’

‘Aye, that’s exactly it, so it is. Exactly.’

The pills certainly seemed to work for their mammy, anyway. In the late afternoon, Aoife and Damien would come home from school and run into the kitchen to find her by the sink, with her back to them and her hands plunged up to the wrist in the soapy water. For hours she’d stand, staring out of the wee steamed-up window, moving only to top up the basin from the hot tap every now and then. Aoife reached up to dip her finger in the water once, after it had just been drained and refilled, and it was scaldingly hot. Her mammy’s hands stayed in there, though, getting all folded and wrinkly like her granny’s skin. It seemed to Aoife that her mammy had real problems getting herself to the right temperature: before the pills she’d been roasted and was always trying to cool herself down, and after the pills she was baltic and was constantly trying to warm herself up.

The benefit of having their mammy spending the majority of her time at the sink was that Aoife and Damien found they had free rein. They’d sprint from room to room of the terraced house, playing at chases or hide-and-seek. Damien took to carrying the bow-and-quiver set that he’d been given for his seventh birthday wherever he went and firing the plastic arrows at anything that moved, whether that be the neighbourhood cats in the garden outside or Aoife as she made her way from her bedroom to the bathroom. After her mammy had been taking the pills for a few days, Aoife realised that she could reach up and take the biscuits from the cupboard beside the stove without being noticed. Their daddy was working on a garden out near Hillsborough and wasn’t back at night until darkness had taken control of the streets outside. By the time he trudged in, Aoife and Damien were both tired out and would be sprawled out on the sofa in the living room, watching the telly and nibbling on biscuits. Their mammy would be in the kitchen, her hands deep in the warm

water, until her husband put his dirt-stained hands on her hips and walked her, dripping, across to the dining table for dinner. She'd feed herself, and smile vacantly, but there was no conversation from her, and Aoife's daddy had to steer her away from the kitchen and up the stairs to the bathroom after they'd eaten to make sure that she filled the bath, rather than the sink, for her nightly wash.

The days slid by and the dishes piled up by the side of her mammy's misused dishwasher. The mountain of clothes began to spill over the top of the laundry basket like a saucepan boiling over, and the floor around the telly became littered with biscuit wrappers and mugs of half-finished tea with floating islands of congealing milk in the centre of the brown liquid. Damien came in from school with a mucky blazer and it fell to Aoife to scrub at it with the nailbrush. The newspaper boy came knocking and she had to root through her mammy's pockets for enough change to pay him with. Her daddy dandered in with the smell of whiskey on him and asked her to wet the tea leaves and put the chip pan on for their dinner. It took all this, and more, for Aoife to grow scunnered of the new way of things.

On the second weekend, after putting on the wash, running out to McGrath's for the messages, taking the dirty dishes up the stairs to the bathroom sink and scrubbing at the tomato ketchup stain her daddy had left on the sofa after he came in blocked, Aoife stood in the doorway of the kitchen and picked up Damien's bow-and-quiver from where it lay on the worktop. Stretching out the string, she imagined aiming one of the plastic arrows at her mammy's back. She imagined pulling it back as far as it would go and then calling out in a loud voice, with an unfamiliar accent, 'Get your hands up, you bastard!' She could see her mammy's head twisting, then, to look over her shoulder as Eamonn had; could hear the *twang* from the taut string as it was released, a second noise coming just moments after the shout of warning; could see the arms lifting up, raising themselves as Eamonn's had, suds flying up and around, splattering the lino like blood against concrete.

Instead, she soundlessly set the bow down on the side and leant against the door-jamb to stare at her mammy's back. The shoulders of Cathy Brennan, either because the water had gone cold or because she had caught the arrow of her daughter's hatred, shuddered and then were still.

The place is a dive. They always are. Streaks of damp down the walls, single mattress by the radiator in the upstairs bedroom. Bare. With a bottle of whiskey beside it. Like I asked for. I lead Whitey over to the mattress, ease him down, tie his wrists to the radiator, and then clamber on top of him. Lifting the whiskey, I keep him drinking whilst I straddle him. The smell of the alcohol rises like antiseptic.

'You think I'm a ride, don't you?' I breathe, into his ear.

'Aw, Cass,' he mumbles, from between thickened lips. 'Aw, Cassie.'

'You ever killed a man, Whitey?' I ask. 'Or hurt him so as he'll never recover?'

He looks confused by that, shakes his head. I reach in underneath my skirt and tug my underwear to one side. I can feel the thing inside, shifting as I shift, moving as I move. Waiting, it is, impatiently. As I pull his fly down, he murmurs something about having a packet of rubbers in the pocket of his jeans. He tries to point with his bound hands.

'I've plenty of protection,' I say. Then I ease my body up, seeking the angle. There's a whistle and a wheeze coming from him now, he's fair fit to burst. Like a kettle near boiling point. With a blissful smile spread across his face. He's drunk as a lord, getting his hole. All is right in the world of Whitey. For now. Just a final movement of my hips, a final positioning, and then I'm ready. I grit my teeth and wait for his thrust. Always wait for the man, just for those few seconds of deadly anticipation.

A sudden, high-pitched screech of pain. He's squirming and twisting beneath me. I'm not for letting him go, though, not yet. Clamping my thighs, keeping him in. My own teeth set

together with the agony of it. I close my eyes, grind down, and listen as the screams grow louder and sharper. I listen as the hurt and sorrow of it all penetrates through his whiskey-addled confusion. I'm for waiting until his cries crack, until the tears stream, until he's ready to plead.