

The Consultant

J I M L E W I S

YOU ARE WATCHING your child die. There is nothing you can do. You wait and watch as the nurse comes in and checks the drip, fills in the chart and asks you if you want a cup of tea. She comes close, places her hand gently on Eileen's forehead. She turns to go, but halts in the doorway. You stop your rocking back and forth.

"Mr Khan will be along afterwards... this afternoon... to talk to you, Mr Kelly and your wife."

You nod a thank you to her.

"Martha... Mrs Kelly, will be here after her work." You say. "As soon as she's finished in the school kitchen."

Mrs Flaherty will pick up the other wain after school. You are not looking forward to what the consultant has to say. You put your head in your hands. Shame again coming upon you, for how you manhandled Fr. O'Dowd. But with his smug ways he had it coming.

"Mr Kelly, it may be that God has chosen your Eileen to be with him and our Blessed Mother and be spared the sully of this vale of tears," the priest had said.

Your hands had him by the throat before your head knew it. The Guard that had come along from the Kesh, pulled you off him. Now the screw sits, there in the corner, pretending to read the *Belfast Telegraph*. His big body bulges over the chair. He told you there is an armed RUC man outside the door. The screw's eyes flicker on you. Your own are moist. The cuffs make it hard to rub away and hide the rising tears.

“Chosen by God?”

How could a loving God choose a nine-year-old girl? You reach for Eileen’s hand. Her wrists are stalks now. Once at Portrush, in Water World, those small hands had clung round your neck as you’d set off down the slide. The lifeguard had told you off and once out of sight of him you had both laughed at the small act of shared wickedness.

After your arrest, you thought at first that her becoming thinner was her keening for you. The weekly visits seemed to be taking their toll on her and Martha. Getting so early to the Sinn Fein office on the Falls for the Minibus, and then the long journey to see you, seemed to be draining the life out of her, the fire in her red hair fading. But Seamus didn’t seem to notice anything, not the searches nor the clashing of doors, nor the turning of keys. He’d sit on the floor playing with a racing car or colouring in his book. Eileen seemed sad, pale and thinner on each visit. Then, that time Martha came without the children, you knew it was bad. She burst into tears as she entered the visitor space and saw you. They wouldn’t let you touch her or comfort her.

So now you wait for Mr Khan, the consultant. It is strange how the consultant is always a Mister. They must have climbed to the top of the heap and dropped the need for the honour of being called Doctor. You wonder if the queen was ever called plain Mrs Windsor. Now that is an odd thought to you, to learn everything and know so much you become a plain Mister again.

Eileen stirs for a moment and whimpers. You long to cradle her in your arms, the way you did that time when she fell asleep in the back of the car and they made you get out at the checkpoint at Aughnacloy. You would not have her wakened. You stood and watched and she slept across your shoulder as they took the car apart. Then, when they finished, with everything you owned out on the ground, they’d leave you to put it back. You’d settle her down on the back seat and the soldiers would be looking, watching and laughing between themselves. You couldn’t make out a face. They were shadows with guns and you were a blinded rabbit in the glare of their floodlights.

They knew who you were and what you believed. So, you took their payback, but you would protect Eileen.

It was Mr Khan who had told Martha it was Leukaemia, had told her that recovery rates were better than they were twenty years before. But you knew what Cancer was. As a child, it was like a dirty word, an evil that came upon you if it ever entered your mouth. Cancer, Brit, grass, Crown forces, they all brought evil with them, but Leukaemia, the word has a soft lull to it, like it was something that sends you off into dreamy sleep, so that you never come back.

Martha had brought a leaflet that told about blood cells and marrow and all the great work going on at the Royal Victoria and elsewhere and the world-famous doctors, right here in the North, that were breaking new boundaries, that in a year or two would result in a cure.

You think back to the night they lifted you. You knew you had fouled up. They took swabs so they knew you'd been handling. You kept quiet; you felt shame that you'd fouled up and that closed your mouth tighter. If it had been a General, a Lord or an Earl you'd have proudly spilled the beans, taken the whole wrap and protected the others. So, in the end, all they could put you away for, was handling.

You'd walked in that part of North Belfast a dozen times that week. You'd seen the dark green BMW outside the gardened Square near Queens. You walked past where it would be parked, knew when it would be there and for how long. You learned the escape routes. It is easy to be invisible; you become part of the scene. You had a wad of leaflets to push through every letter box, for double glazing, a new bar and whatever else they got for you. The streets there were well used to you coming and going.

From what you learned, it was you that chose the time, when few students would be about. There were no cameras in that part of the street and you'd practised the tying of laces by the target. But the street light was blinking and fading that night and the street was dark, as you bent down to tie your shoe, and stick the device under the car, and then to pull the cord gingerly, to arm it. In the dark it was an easy mistake.

Black can look dark green. You fouled up. So, when the blast came you were far enough away to be seen running back. Never run away, that's what the guilty do. The scared freeze and cower. The good, the helpers, the compassionate run back, run towards.

They cordoned off the scene. They expected another bomb to catch the arriving Brits. This time there would be no second one. They told you to disperse and you caught the bus from the Botanic Gardens and then a black cab up the Falls to Anderson Town, and safety. But somewhere a camera caught you. They had suspicions. The hooding and beating didn't help them. You were silent because you were shamed. They kept you awake and in the morning, they flung the newspaper in front of you.

It was the one from the dark corner that spoke. The one not in uniform. Him with the English voice.

"See what you have done? Killed a good man."

The one who'd beaten you in the cell, now held your head between his hands from behind. He was strong and he held you in his vice.

"There's no good Englishman!" you shouted.

He smashed your face onto the table and he pulled your head back by the hair. Blood from your nose dripped on the smiling picture of a middle-aged man and below it a picture of three girls and a woman and the same smiling man.

The English voice called, "Enough!"

You read:

Consultant Dr Arthur Forbes was killed yesterday by what is believed to be an IRA bomb. Dr Forbes was a world-renowned cancer expert with a special interest in childhood Leukaemia. His loss will be a great blow to the international community engaged in this area of research.

You remember you said, "I'm sorry for him."

"Sorry?" said the voice.

"Sorry, but there's a war on."

"You people." The voice said, "You people..."

Martha comes in. There is a female screw with her. She searches Martha and does not allow you to embrace. You notice that Eileen is struggling for breath.

The nurse opens the door. An Indian looking man, in a suit, enters. You catch a glimpse of a priest behind him. A different priest. He is in the grey robe of a Franciscan.

"I asked him to come." Martha says. "The friar..."

He follows her and stands by the window. He nods to each in the room.

The Consultant bows his head before he looks up. He breathes in and you struggle to cover your ears. The cuffs only shut him half out. He has nothing to say that you want to hear...