

Cigarette Break

The commotion outside his cell only slowly subsided. Now that they had finally let go of Dally, it seemed the police were turning on each other.

That terrorist cunt's finished! Gonna fuckin' kill him!, Peeler One roared.

Dally couldn't make out Peeler Two's answer through his own breath. Raspy, heaving gasps for air. Better still than listening to his own unhinged laughter from before, a demented soundtrack for Peeler One's bizarre dance through the cell, while the blood pulsing from his left hand trailed after him. *He bit me, he bit me*, Peeler One had wailed, and Dally had laughed and laughed, wound up and impossible to stop. For the first time in his life he had been afraid to lose his mind. Not anymore. Too late now to be afraid of anything. The pain leaned in on him again, ran its blade into his shoulder.

During yesterday's interrogation, Peeler One, in his quest for truth, had twisted Dally's right arm behind his back until he had heard his shoulder joint snap out of place. Dally had begged the police doctor not to report the incident, who had promised he wouldn't. He still reported the incident. Today, Peeler One had come back for his second try.

Make mine a double, he had grinned.

It would have worked, had he not also tried to shut Dally up with his left hand at the same time, paying for his noise sensitivity with a nearly severed thumb.

The laugh started to stir again, hiccup-like. Dally clamped down on it with tight lips. He tasted the peeler's blood - liquid, sticky metal coating his tongue.

If they come back to screw you up for this you're going to die in here and no-one's going to give a fuck.

The thought turned his hiccup into nausea.

He turned his head and retched. Nothing but bile and some bloody smears. Hardly surprising. His last meal was a lifetime ago, the evening before they came to arrest him under *suspicion of terrorist activity*. Cheese toasties with Marie, listening to an endless loop of U2 on the cassette deck. Just like all the other girls, Marie had always wanted to marry Bono. She ended up with Dally, a small rented bedsit in lower West Belfast and cheese toasties on Friday nights.

2nd December 1983.

How long was that ago? A day? A week?

They never answered his questions about time. Instead they said that they could keep a piece of shit like him for up to seven days. A long time, they said. But it was entirely up to him to speed it up. All they wanted was a name. Nothing more. *I can't remember names very well*, Dally had told them again and again, also yesterday to Peeler One.

It was the truth. It was his last sentence with his arm intact.

Outside it had become quiet. Peeler One was gone, but Peeler Two, he had stayed behind. Right outside that door. Listening. Dally's body knew well before him, every pore leaking sweat, heart trembling in the face of a door handle that would eventually, inevitably turn.

He had never seen Peeler Two in any of his interrogations. He had looked clumsy compared to Peeler One's agile aggression. Unremarkable, apart from a port wine stain to the right side of his neck, its three fingers reaching across his cheek like the after-burn of a slap in the face.

When Peeler One had tried to 'finish him off', Peeler Two had finally left his state of observance and restrained his co-

interrogator, eventually shoving him out of the room. But what did that mean anyway? Belfast police were all the enemy. Those without a uniform even more so. Torturing bastards, the lot of them.

Sooner or later, Peeler Two would come through that door, maybe on his own, but more probably in the company of others to finally achieve what Peeler One had tried before. Turning him into a terrorist, preferably a traitor. Dallas Ferguson was neither. Would never be, no matter how many of them would show up. Let them come. He was ready.

The boy was still cowering in the same corner of the interrogation room where Will had left him, his arms and legs a tight cocoon around him. The hysterics were over, but his body was still rigid with tension, his eyes transfixed on Will, trying to anticipate when his malevolence would turn into action. On his cheeks, smears of DI Quinn's blood started to crust over.

20 years old, no IRA ties as far as anyone could tell, but in possession of a Smith & Wesson 9mm. According to a watchful neighbour informant, it had been handed over to him by an unidentified IRA member. During the arrest, the weapon had been secured, wrapped into a bundle of yesterday's papers under the kitchen sink. The case was a blazing no-brainer. All they needed now was either a signed confession that confirmed the gun's terrorist purpose (5 years prison) or the name of the IRA contact (2 years prison, if even). It usually took a maximum of three days before small fish like that boy started to break.

After four days of questioning, they had achieved exactly nothing. Dallas Ferguson's resistance against the inevitable

was so stubborn and futile it started to confuse the interrogation teams. The antidote of choice against confusion was violence.

If you asked Will, it would get them nowhere with this boy's kind. Something within people like that was more resilient to pain than their bodies, growing stronger with each abuse. And darker.

Thing was, nobody asked Will. He was nothing more but the next available Detective Sergeant, filling in for Quinn's tummy bugged fellow interrogator.

Low-rank, a slave to the rules. Weak.

Just like most of the others, DI Quinn had never held back his opinion on Will's approach.

That stupid fuck is beyond psychology, McCrea, he had told Will on their way into the interrogation room, chuckling about the accidental rhyme. I'll crack him open before you even start analyzing. Give me ten minutes and he'll beg to sign that fucking rag with a broken arm.

Well. Seems like Quinn himself wouldn't sign anything anytime soon.

Will stopped a couple of feet away from the boy, entering the staring contest. The boys' eyes were so dark they seemed to have no pupils at all. Half Italian. That much Will had gathered from his file. After a while, the boy's gaze trailed off and got stuck in an empty distance.

He still wore the t-shirt they had arrested him in. On the mugshot it was still white.

"C'mon", Will said. "Get up and come with me."

"Where to?", the boy shot back. His voice, coarse from screaming, trembled like the rest of him just had minutes ago.

"Outside. Bathroom. Freshen up a bit."

The boy looked as if Will had asked to waltz with him.

"Don't worry, I'll leave you in peace." Will took another step towards him, extended his hand.

"No, please, I-"

The boy stopped and clenched his jaw, furious with himself, as if he had spilled a long kept secret to the wrong guy. Then he copiously got to his feet, carefully avoiding using his right arm and Will's help.

When he finally stood up, his knees quivered.

"Leave it, I'm fine", he waved Will off. Then his knees gave way, leaving it to Will's reflexes to save him from hitting the blood-soiled floor. Waltzing couldn't have brought them any closer together.

The boy was lighter than he had expected, the muscles under his t-shirt thin and wiry. He smelled of unwashed hair and four days spent in fear.

"It's alright", he insisted after regaining his strength, pulling himself away from Will, staggering out of the corner. He pushed one of his unruly locks out of his face. He was no terrorist, this one. That didn't mean he couldn't become one, though.

"You gonna get going or what?", Will said, gruffer than necessary. "Or want to wait for Quinn?"

He opened the right tap, pooled icy water in his hand, then topped it up with some scalding one from the left tap, splashing it into his face, running his damp fingers through his hair. He took a mouthful and rinsed, his teeth hurting from the cold. So be it, as long as there was no more blood curdling in his spit in the sink. Next step was getting rid of the memory of Peeler One's senewy flesh.

The air was cold but still stuffy, loads of chlorine against a backdrop of urine.

Peeler Two watched his every move from his post at the door leading into the corridor. He looked Dally's height, but he was at least twice his age and easily double his weight. Ten seconds of holding Dally up had left him panting. He wore a jumper that used to be cool when Dally was ten. Only his eyes looked all in the present, alert, picking up on invisible things.

"You left-handed?", he asked, while Dally dried his face into his t-shirt.

What kind of question was that? Dally frowned. Peeler One at least had been somewhat predictable in his brutality.

"Yeah, why?"

Peeler Two shrugged, his interest in Dally's answer already lost before he had opened his mouth. He was propped up against the doorframe, arms folded in front of his chest. Just two lads, having some craic on the loo. He leisurely reached under his V-neck and extracted a crumpled pack of cigarettes.

"Want one?", he asked, pulling one out and sticking it between his own lips.

Damn.

Not that Camels were his thing, but his last smoke was four days ago. Surely this one wouldn't come for free.

He knew that from TV. Once the fags came out, even the hardest villains cracked like match-sticks.

He shook his head.

Peeler Two laughed and tilted his head, looked at Dally, pleased, as if he had anticipated exactly that reaction. He reached into his V-neck again to put away the cigarettes.

"Boy, you're making your life harder than it has to be."

He took a mirthless drag of his Camel. No sign of him making way and returning to the interrogation room.

What next?

Dally waited, water prickling his skin, nipping at the roots of his arm hair.

Peeler Two also waited, mimicking the joy of smoking while keeping a watchful eye on Dally's motionless presence, every blink, every breath.

Behind him heavy shoes shuffled past the bathroom door and down the corridor. The world seemed to have forgotten about them both.

They would return eventually, though, even Peeler One. He wasn't dead after all, only injured. Still and even more capable of murder now.

"Tell me, are you married?", Peeler Two asked out of nowhere. Devoid of any better answer, Dally just nodded.

What an odd interrogation. No single question seemed to matter. Maybe Marie would have been able to explain. She was the psycho student.

"And - anything different now?", the Peeler went on.

"Yeah, for Marie, I suppose." Dally shrugged, a silly reflex immediately punished by another axe blow into his right shoulder.

That terrorist cunt is finished!

"Why - aren't you married yourself?" No idea where that came from. "Uhm, I mean ..."

"... an old man like me should be, you mean?" He smirked, his bushy eyebrows vanishing into the unkempt shock of strawberry blonde hair across his forehead.

Dally blushed, got annoyed, blushed even more, while Peeler Two slowly passed him to open the toilet door. Inside, the butt hissed in the bowl.

"Guess I should be. At least that's what my girlfriend keeps saying", he mused over the flush. "I just never thought it necessary, that's all."

"Or you haven't met the right girl yet."

Peeler Two made a humming noise and returned from the cubicle, leaving the door half open.

He slowly scratched his port wine stain.

"You done? Can we go?"

"Is there a choice?"

Peeler Two pretended to think about that, then shook his head in silence. An abyss of tiredness opened up underneath Dally.

That terrorist cunt is finished!

"Got a cig for me now ... please?"

The first couple of drags he inhaled so deeply they took forever to get back out. Now, smoke billowed from the boy's nostrils. He seemed calmer overall, but his eyes darted to the bathroom door from time to time, expecting Quinn to enter the room any minute, his hand replaced by a hook.

As if Quinn was his biggest problem.

"You're going to go down for five years if you keep clamming up. You know that, do you?"

The boy's gaze all of a sudden froze and he squinted towards the eternal wintry dusk that seeped in through a light-well behind a milk-glass security window.

"Ever been in prison?"

Instead of an answer, the boy took another drag of his stub, holding it between his thumb and index finger like the rebel without a cause that he was.

"Five years, nothing less. You'll come out a different lad."

"Five years always make a difference."

His West Belfast accent was strong, but less so than what Will was used to from other suspects. His parents had wanted something better for him than this, no doubt.

"Not like that. Hardly anyone finds their way back after it. You think it's worth it? Being a frickin' mule for those criminals? Sacrificing five years with your wife? Your family?"

Preaching Will McCrea, tilting at windmills, like a frickin' mule himself.

For the first time the boy showed his teeth, wrapped into a cynical smile. They were small, regular, pointy - wolf teeth.

"You have any friends? I mean ... real ones?"

Will thought about it, and for too long.

"See?", the boy said, obviously deploring the sad Detective with no wife and no friends. "You wouldn't even have a clue."

Loyalty, it hit Will.

The boy must have kept the gun for a friend. A friend in the IRA. And where that information came from, there surely was more to dig up. Names, connections, leads.

They had two days left to get the real meat out of him. Get him off that terrorist conveyor belt three years earlier.

The boy flicked the cigarette butt off his fingers. In an impossible angle, it passed through the half-open cubicle door and into the toilet bowl. Hiss.

He didn't seem to be at all surprised about his precision. He made a snorting sound through the nose, obviously his take on a genuine smile.

"Thanks for the smoke."

For the first time since they had left for the bathroom, he directly looked at Will, made his snorting noise again and then turned to open the door into the corridor.

DI Robertson and DS Myers were waiting in the room to take over.

"I suppose you've got a long report to write, Sergeant", said Robertson, all hierarchy, winking at Will as he showed him the door. The boy just sat there at the table, staring at his hands in his lap.

"Well then, Magic McCrea?" Robertson stood in front of Will's desk, a half eaten after-lunch banana in hand. "Fill me into your secret, will you?"

Will frowned, his head full of snippets about the boy's quite obscure background, snippets that might well lead them to those so-called friends for whom he was about to kick his life into the gutter.

"Excuse me?"

"Your so-called cigarette break." Robertson grinned at him, horse-lipped. "As soon as we sat down, Ferguson asked to sign the confession.

Four days of nothing, and then you do your fake smoking routine, sprinkle a bit of magic ash and he cracks wide open", with his banana, he imitated a hand signing. One of those unbearable strings of peel fell towards Will's typewriter, now dangling from his semi-ready report.

"Not bad, McCrea", he declared while munching away. "One more confessed terrorist off Belfast's streets."

"What will we do about the guy who gave the gun to him?"

"We'll happily forget about him." Robertson looked bewildered.

"Don't know about you but *my* cases are stacking up sky-high.

The stubborn fuck finally signed, god's sake, and good riddance. For five years, anyway. Keep your world-saving energy for some worthy cause, McCrea."

He winked at Will, balled up the empty banana peel in his hand and ambled over to his own desk.

Will stared at this morning's report. Done, apart from the bathroom episode. After a while he plucked the paper and its banana pendant from the typewriter, put it into the file named **Dallas Ferguson**, closed it and placed it on top of his "done" pile before getting himself a tea.

On his way from the kitchen he decided to finally propose to Sarah. It was six years, and there was no reason not to. Next week, he would make a stop at her favourite jeweller's. For sure.

How did you like the story? Let me know by commenting on the blog or write a review on amazon or wherever you like. Thanks so much for your support!

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