

Chapter 1 continued...

After Simon had left, I fell into an uneasy slumber. For the first time in decades, I remember Brian. I'd known him since school days. After school, he'd tried one or two things before going into the forces. We'd kept in intermittent contact over the years, and he'd just called round on the off-chance as he'd recently been posted to the area. Amy had taken the children out shopping, and I was supposed to be tidying up before the evening guests arrived; but gladly dropped everything when Brian called in. Recently promoted to corporal, he was rather full of himself, showing off the two stripes on his arm and regaling me with his latest military tale. Apparently, the RAF wasn't taking the IRA terribly seriously.

According to Brian, he'd been put in charge of a group of recruits at his base in Ashley Green, not twenty miles away, and given orders to guard the armoury. Thinking that his little group would be given rifles at least – and perhaps a sub-machine gun for himself – he marched his troop along to draw their weapons.

Presenting himself to the Pilot Officer in charge, he explained his errand, found that he was expected, and was presented with an armful of baseball bats. He paused while he tried to think of the best way of framing his question.

'Is that it, sir? To guard the armoury?'

'Yes, corporal. Well?' This as Brian didn't move.

'Any problems, corporal?'

'No, sir!' Brian saluted with his free hand, and goes outside to issue his "weapons".

And off they jolly well go to guard the armoury against an expected IRA attack – an Irish Republican Army who had already stolen both light and heavy weapons and ammunition from other places...

'Corp! Hey, corp?' a rather worried voice from the back of the party.

'Yes?'

'What we gonna do if they come?'

Brian paused.

'Don't know about you, my lad, but you won't see me for dust!'

It was perhaps fortunate for Brian's career that the IRA didn't come that night – nor any night since, and his little party had been "stood down".

It was as he and I were laughing at the absurdities of military life that there was a furious knocking at the door.

‘There is a door-bell, you know.’ I spoke before realising my mistake. Four burly military policemen forced their way past me into the hall leaving the door open. The sergeant in charge silently nodded to one of his colleagues, who immediately stationed himself at the front door. Then he deigned to speak to me.

‘Right – kids – where are they?’

‘Out.’ I replied.

‘Yeah? Who with?’

‘Look – sergeant, I don’t know what all this is about, but before you go any further, I demand to know what is going on?’

‘Oh, you “demand” do you? Let me tell you, sir’ (the last word was clearly not meant with any respect) ‘that you have no rights to demand anything – understood?’

I said nothing.

‘The kids, where are they?’

‘Out.’

The sergeant took a step closer, so I continued,

‘Shopping, with their mother. Satisfied?’

‘Not really – it means we’ll have to wait, won’t it?’ At this point, the sergeant noticed Brian standing in the hallway, but before he could do more than fix him with a baleful eye, the soldier on the door stiffened.

‘Here they are.’

Any thought I or Brian might have had at moving or issuing a warning, was stopped by the presence of the other Military Police – all they had to do was stand in front of us – and so it was that Mr and Mrs David Jones, with their two month old baby walked unsuspectingly up to the front door.

Chaos. Ordered chaos because the military were in charge, but chaos none-the-less. Brian and I insisted that this was not my wife and child (who they thought Mr Jones was, I do not know.) Mr Jones insisted – equally vehemently – that the child was his, was born in Gloucester, not here, and was a girl. The military police insisted that everything they wanted checking would be checked by them in the way they wanted. The child was forcibly removed from her mother’s arms, laid screaming on our cold kitchen table and stripped to establish her sex.

At the right moment, in so many of these cases, there is silence. There was silence now. Even poor baby Katherine was gulping for breath in between yells. A part of me stood back from the scene. From where I stood, I could see into both the hallway and the kitchen. A moment frozen in time and seared on the memory. One soldier staring down at the child, her mother replacing hysteria with cold fury, but still in the grip of another soldier so that she couldn't interfere. Her husband thrusting birth certificate and driving license into the sergeant's unwilling hands. Behind me, I could even "see" Brian trying to take everything in. And Amy standing at the door with our children about to demand, in her turn, what was going on.

Then, the noise reasserted itself briefly.

'Silence!' a bellow from the sergeant had the desired effect from everyone except the infant, still lying on the table. He made a pretence of examining the documents he'd been given.

'Right. That appears to be in order. Baxter, return the child to its mother.' There was no need to say it twice: Katherine was immediately redressed and comforted.

'Now – are *these* yours?' the sergeant waved an arm in the direction of the doorway – trying to make it sound as if I had deliberately misled him about Katherine.

'Yes, we are,' Amy replied coming towards him, 'and what do you think you are doing in our home?'

'We're carrying out orders, madam.'

How Amy gets civil replies when I only get abuse, I'll never know, but the sergeant – newly polite – was still going to carry out those orders.

'We have information that there was a young male child here.'

'I don't call six "old," do you?' said Amy.

'And you have no other children?' he was staring at our three, standing in mute terror in close order about their mother.

'None. Are we to provide their birth certificates, too?'

The sergeant seemed disposed to take Amy's word that our three were all over two years of age – and that there were no other children hiding about the place. His three colleagues were obviously anxious to be gone and were glancing at the door and shuffling their feet, but their leader was made of sterner stuff. There was still someone here whose presence had not been satisfactorily explained.

‘Well, corporal, what is your role here?’

‘Just visiting my friend, sergeant.’

‘Leave?’

‘A forty-eight.’

‘I’ll have a look at that. Unless, of course, you have any objection?’

‘No objection, sergeant.’

All very correct, all very courteous – but the Army sergeant and RAF corporal didn’t strike me as bosom pals. The sergeant glanced at Brian’s pass.

‘If I were you corporal, I’d get back to camp as soon as you can.’

‘Thank you for your advice, sergeant,’ said Brian as he pocketed his pass, ‘I’ll bear it in mind.’

With a nod in the direction of my wife, the sergeant herded his MPs out of the door, leaving me with the task of explaining to her, never mind Mr and Mrs Jones, what it had all been about. Unsurprisingly, despite the booked room, Mr and Mrs Jones decided not to stay. She wanted to get to her parents in Caernarvon as soon as possible. So Amy prepared tea and a sandwich for them, ‘on the house,’ while they sorted Katherine out. Then they left.

For me, the next priority was Brian. I had heard the threat in the sergeant’s last statement, even if he hadn’t. Brian saw things differently. His hypothesis was that he had a perfectly legitimate pass and saw no reason to return to his station until 08:00 hours the next day. I let it go. I still had a wife and three rather distressed children to deal with. Brian left us to it. The rest of the day was subdued – if I didn’t miss the children fighting each other, I did miss their play. In the evening I could distract myself with an almost full hotel. Memory tells me that there was only one free room that night, but as it was low season the books might tell a different story. We did, however, pass a restless night as all three children woke – at different times – with nightmares. In the end we had all three in with Amy, and I got what sleep I could on the put-me-up at the foot of our double bed.

The next day, we started hearing about other visits where children had indeed been taken. Then next event was the social worker’s visit. Here we heard the “explanations”, not that she seemed to care whether we believed them or not: the “genetic disorders that had to be investigated”; the “severe psychological disorder”; the “undesirable religious cult”. Amy knew the sort of people who’d lost children and snorted with derision at the last excuse.

‘And, of course, your own behaviour, has given cause for concern. Your children are on the at risk register. How and when they come off that register depends on you.’

‘Hang on – what behaviour is that? Who’s reported us?’

‘That information is privileged.’

‘What!’

‘I’m not allowed to tell you.’

‘But if we don’t even know what we’re supposed to have done wrong – what can we do about it?’ Amy was getting very angry now.

‘Well, you obviously handle stress badly Mrs Matthewes; so that is one factor I shall take away with me.’

‘What are we supposed to have done wrong?’

‘That is for you to correct – if we need to return it will be to take your children in to care, where they will be looked after properly. Do I make myself clear?’

She made herself clear all right. She held all the cards. Amy was all for protests, committee work: the ‘Where Are Our Children Committee’ wasn’t the catchiest title, but it served. I wasn’t happy: I was for keeping our heads down. I won the argument, but only after we had an official letter informing that they knew about Amy being on the committee, and as she knew where her children were, we had one week to copy to them her resignation letter, or the social worker’s threat would be carried out (and then presumably, Amy would not know where her own children were – never mind anyone else’s).

As for Brian. He was charged with breaking out of, and breaking back into, camp. In spite of his valid pass he was confined to quarters for eight days, and then posted to Germany. We only saw him once after that – as a civilian. He’d been told he’d never get any further promotion, so he’d got out. It was a quieter, more thoughtful, more closed in Brian than the person who’d sat in our lounge on that memorable day. But that day was, by mutual consent, off limits. He drifted out of our lives.

We got by in the years that followed. It was only two year groups that were ‘girl heavy’, and that wasn’t for long – the number of people who moved into the area with sons seemed to even things out a bit, so that by secondary school, it would have taken some

serious research to work out that the girls were born and bred in the town, the boys born elsewhere.

Back in my armchair, I jerked myself awake. This brooding on the past was getting me down. If it carried on, I'd become one of those sad people checking their emails every five minutes! And the present called: time for tea and cakes. The trolley would be rattling down the corridor, and the knock on the door expected. But –

‘You’re popular today, John . Two gentlemen this time – I think it’s official.’

‘That will do, thank you.’ It was the older man who spoke. The nurse (*not* the pretty one) left without pouring any tea.

‘I’m Inspector Brown and this is Sergeant Davies,’ they both flashed warrant cards, but I couldn’t have read either of them, ‘this is just a friendly chat.’

Inspector Brown sat, while his colleague silently paced the room.

‘Looking for something?’ I said to him. He opened his mouth, but the Inspector shook his head, so the Sergeant said nothing, but stopped pacing. I tried not to appear nervous.

‘You had a Mr Rees round here a short while ago?’ framed as a question, but the Inspector knew the answer. I nodded, why not – it’s not as if having visitors is illegal.

‘And you talked about – what, exactly?’

‘The past.’

‘That’s hardly “exact” Mr Matthewes,’ the sergeant this time, ‘you can do better than that. Whose past?’

‘Mine. His.’ I shrugged.

‘Oh, dear. I am not allowed to torture you, Mr Matthewes, but I can insist that you come with me, if that’s what you want.’ The Inspector’s voice was ominously quiet, but two can play at being quiet.

There was silence. Sometimes I’m too stropky for my own good, but I didn’t feel like telling them anything, although I knew I would, sooner or later. Except I didn’t have to. The door opened:

‘Right, you two, out!’

Senior Executive Nursing Supervisors (or whatever they’re calling Matrons this week) don’t normally deign to come and visit the *hoi polloi*, unless it’s on inspection, but without knocking Mrs Barrington-Smythe was here, and she was not happy.

‘Out!’ she commanded again. The two men were clearly not used to this sort of treatment. The inspector put his hand in his pocket.

‘I think you’ll find we’ll be staying,’ he waved his card.

‘And I think you’ll find you’ll be going,’ Mrs Barrington-Smythe held her ground, and held the door open, ‘if, and I mean if, you really do have grounds for questioning Mr Matthewes, you will do it through me, and me only, and you will find that he will have representation – to which he is entitled.’

Against the Nursing Supervisor’s knowledge of this apparent breach of procedure, the Inspector decided that discretion was the better part of valour – on this occasion. He jerked his head at the Sergeant. They moved past the matron into the corridor. Mrs Barrington-Smythe closed the door, but that didn’t prevent me from listening.

‘Gentlemen,’ the tone was much more conciliatory, ‘we know all about Mr Matthewes here, that’s why he is here. His ex-son-in-law keeps us posted. All visitors are closely monitored– which is why you were informed, as a matter of courtesy, mind you, about Simon Rees’s visit. But we don’t want him upset or suspicious...’ they moved off down the corridor, the noise of their conversation replaced by the rattling of the tea trolley while I wondered which ‘him’ wasn’t to be upset – it could hardly be me, as I *had* been upset by Simon Rees. But my thoughts were interrupted by a cheery voice offering tea and cakes.

It was the pretty nurse still on duty. Actually it was nearly the end of her shift, so she had time to chat while I had my mid-afternoon snack. Apparently her brother had followed Mason for a while before he’d seen sense. I just told her that my family was determined not to see sense, but that I’d had absolutely no idea what had happened all those years ago. Tracey (that’s her name – it is a bit silly to be calling all of them ‘nurse’, though I do prefer a bit of formality) is still worried about her brother, but I said that a bit of reality like a job or a relationship would help, even a hobby. Something to distract, stop people thinking about things too much. It was then that she suggested I started writing – take my own advice. After all it would distract me while I lived here, pleasant though it is. She reckoned that, as I didn’t really like day-time TV, I could even get a thousand words a day onto paper. All I needed was a computer and I’d be away.

What a good idea. I’ll start tomorrow.