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Hunger

By Enda Walsh

Northern Ireland 1981

The British Government has withdrawn the political status of all paramilitary prisoners.

Irish Republicans in the Maze Prison are on a "blanket" and "no wash" protest.

There is a dirty protest, the Blanket Protest, which has been going on for years, all in support of the same demand: political status.

That is to say, different treatment for people who commit crimes, hideous crimes, for what they claim to be a political motive and that is what the Government will not grant.

So Daniel he hears a noise coming from his Granny's room he runs up to his Granny's room, he opens the door and there's a waifer having a go with his Granny.

The naughty fellow turns around and says:

See, it's not so fucking funny with a German one.

There is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence.

There is only criminal murder, criminal bombing and criminal violence.

We will not compromise on this

There will be no political status.

I will not wear the uniform of a criminal.

I demand to wear me own clothes.

Non-conforming prisoner 08-12-1980

What?

What's it you say your name is again ?

Gilan.

- Gilan. - Aye.

Fancy Quinn.

Falls Road. Fancy Quinn.

Do you know him?

No.

No ?

How long did you get ?

Twelve years.

And you?

Six years. Six.

Six ?

Aye.

You lucky bastard.

...the political adviser of Merlin Reese

when he was at the Home Office with Roger Darlington.
He rejects the official position on phone taps, saying that there has been only a modest overall increase.
and says that Parliament has no way of knowing how much tapping goes on because the Prime Minister and other senior Ministers don't even have to get warrants to get a tap put into effect.
What ?
Get ready.
Are you ll right, Bobby?
I'm grand Ma.
Are they giving you treatment for that ?
It's been looked after.
And the young fellow ?
He's a handful, I tell you that.
Are you eating all right ?
- I'm grand, Ma.
Are they feeding you all right ?
- Don't you two be worrying about me.
Five minutes.
Five minutes .
You eating all right ?
Aye...
It tastes like shit, doesn't it ?
You get used to it.
You're looking well.
So are you, son. So are you.
The righteous cry out.
And the Lord hears them.
He delivers them from all their troubles.
The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are Christians first.
The righteous man has many troubles,
but the Lord delivers him from them all.
He protects all his bones
and not one of them will be broken.
Evil will slay the wicked and the foes of the righteous will be condemned.
The Lord redeems his servants.
No one will be condemned,
who finds refuge in Him.
Let us pray.
Damn dirty bastards!
- Fucking dirty bastards!
I - I - I. R. A. I - I - I. R. A.
I - I - I. R. A. I - I - I. R. A.

Fucking bastards.
Everything in order ?
- Yes, sir, in order, sir.
Very good.
John. John!
Get the fuck off me.
See that? See that?
Get the fuck off me.
What are you doing to him?
Get the fuck off me, you damn ...
Hi Mom.
Why are you doing sitting in here?
Daisies.
You can sit down any time you like.
Priest etiquette.
Never sit before you're asked.
Sit down, Don.
Don't look them over till you're eager.
Best to hover at the door.
You learned that your first week at the seminary, boy.
Cig ?
Come on.
Bit of a break from smoking the Bible, eh?
Work out which pick is the best smoke ?
We only smoke the Lamentations. Just right for a cigarette.
Nice room.
Very clean.
Where is it you're from again, Don ?
Guess.
Ballygobackwards.
Oh, the city dog.
- Ballyroberts.
We play south of Ballymonie: Kilrea.
I remember a homily you did in March sometime.
Will you listen to it ?
I'm sure the men hold you in high esteem.
I can feel a dig coming on.
You're very quick.
Right.
No, you're respected, you know that.
I like those stories you tell about the countryside.
A child held for poaching, robbing apples, stampeding cattle...
Fine education for a priest.
A priest working in West Belfast ? It is, aye.

Stampeding comes in handy down in the Falls Road, eh ?

The RUC hate me.

(Royal Ulster Police, Protestant police.)

You miss it though ?

- What?

The countryside.

I sort of get home and see my wee brother every month or so...

but I miss the usual clean air... space, all that.

It feels closer to who you are.

That it is, no question.

Something like a fish out of water working in a big city like Belfast...

but it's a job, isn't it ?

You stop looking around at your surroundings quick enough when you figure that your business is the business of the soul and all.

Business of the soul ?

Aye. You know what I mean.

I'm going down the same way too ?

Aye, and you can use that for your charge.

Go on.

Well, I suppose what I'm saying is...

you get on.

Kilrea can wait until I'm an old man.

Too many scavengers will be saved in Belfast anyway.

Busy work, aye.

Should God award you in heaven ?

Aye, and I'll be thankful.

Once there's wine involved.

So what does your wee brother do back home ?

He is parish priest.

He's a sneaky wee bastard.

You know the sort, Bobby.

Still goes poaching.

Poaching jobs.

And he's younger than me by 8 years all right.

Go on.

As a cleric, I work in a parish beside Kilrea. We hold the place... working my ass off.

Escorting the elderly, mobile confession.

The glamorous stuff.

Oh, aye.

So, anyway, the position comes up in Kilrea.

Right.

And I'm passed over for some reason or other.

No reason, probably.

For taking too much cake off the ladies.

Probably.

So ?

So five years later

the position again comes up back in Kilrea...

and my brother Michael waltzes right in to it.

Fuck.

He is made parish priest at 28.

More spiritual probably. Less liberal than you.

He worked the bishop. He's a golfer.

He's a pushy little twirp, that's what he is.

At least you're not bitter.

Oh no, I couldn't be that.

Parish priest at 28 ? Fantastic.

He has two cars.

And the house he has is the most.

He has a maid, a cook.

I'm stuck in a two up two down.

with a fat Kerry man who drones on and on about Gaelic football.

Can we stop talking about that ?

Jesus. You're the one who's talking.

How's your smoke going ?

Grand.

Filthy habit. Disgusting.

Oh, yeah, awful. Lovely, though.

Aye. Praise the Lord.

Oh, stop it.

So, what happened to your eye, Bobby ?

What ?

Your eye ?

Difference of opinion.

How's the other fellow ?

A lot worse. Believe me.

So, what did you call me here for ?

Why, was that the issue you were trying to avoid ?

Priest etiquette. Start with the small talk.

I'm learning a lot about the priesthood, Don.

You'd make a fine priest.

Why ?

Good talker. Man of principles. A leader of men.

A political terrorist.

The church loves a reformed crook.

Aye.

I always felt that thief next to Jesus got off lightly.

But he recognized his sins.

Did he, though ?

Aye. Said as much.

When you're hung from a cross you're gonna say anything.

Jesus offers him a seat next to his Daddy,
in a place called Paradise.

You know, you're always gonna put your hand up
and ask if you can have a piece of that.

Aye. Even when he's nailed to a cross.

Jesus Christ ! That's sacrilegious.

Sacrilegious.

Aye.

No, no. He was a dirty thief.

So, what did you want me to tell me ?

Where are you at ?

Been driven mad by that Governor yet ?

Says he's been negotiating.

It's been a sideshow.

I can tell you that for nothing.

But you understand why you need to do it.

Because we are no longer good propaganda.

According to whom ? The leadership ?

The time has come.

A decision had to be made.

Do you think that's what the leadership think ?

Maybe. I do not know.

Is there paranoia there, Bobby ?

Ten thousand people marched for the seven hunger strikers last October,
right?

Right.

International pressure on the Brits and all that.

As your time...

Even the Pope is having a say...

getting involved. The whole world trying to get

Maggie Thatcher to back down and give us our demands.

But it all came to nothing.

Right.

The hunger strike failed.

We are on the frontline. We created

the protest. It's our responsibility.

Leadership may be very clear to me, Don.

Four and half years in a 'no wash' protest,

as much as it has highlightes republicanism to some extent...

it has also distracted from the wider development of the organization.

That's because your needs are specific needs.
Of course they are.
Some women bringing up three children in West Belfast
shouldn't care about civilian type clothes or whatever the fuck they're
calling these clown outfits.
Not so.
Honest to God, Don.
We were promised our own clothes.
It's childish sculduggery.
So the leadership have had enough of you ?
In an ideal world,
we would be fighting our battles independently.
But we're tied.
Nothing has changed here,
nothing has moved on.
The leadership are stuck with us.
until there's some realistic chance
of moving towards political status.
That's the hard truth of it.
Say get me to negotiate with
these lying, renegging monkeys.
when there's never nothing on the table, it's just pure crap.
I'm not going to be marching to this Governor's office and
get caught up in some mindless,
pointless dialogue with that pompous bastard.
He is a big fan of yours.
Take his two short planks, Don. A moron.
Can you believe that they made him governor though ?
It's a bloody insult to humanity.
Mother of Jesus.
Where do you get your energy from ?
I was a cross-country runner when I was a boy.
I could have guessed it. Big engine on you.
Cross-country runner.
That explains a lot about you, Bobby.
I loved it so bad.
That's the whole country thing for me.
Jesus. They'd have to hold me back at finishing line or I'd keep on
running.
I was seen as a mongrel from out of the city.
Frightening the cattle and all. It was a funny time.
Frightened the cattle ?
Oh, I terrified them.
Think you can get milk and burgers from them monsters ? Jesus Christ !

The next time round I'm gonna be born in the countryside, guaranteed.
Wild life, birds.
I love all that. Paradise.
Aye. And you'd learn to relax too.
Aye.
Maybe, you never know. I've never tried it before.
I'm starting a hunger strike on the 1st of March.
That's why you're here.
That's what I'm telling you.
Aye, I heard that.
Does your family know ?
I got word to them, aye.
Have you spoken with them ?
Got a visit in two week's time. We talked then.
How do you think they will take it ?
What do you think, Don ?
And your wee boy ?
So, what makes it different from the last time ?
Last time the strike was flawed.
It became emotional.
Seven men started at the same time.
They all got weak and couldn't let the weakest one die...
which left us susceptible to being conned by the Brits
And that is exactly what we were.
Conned.
This time out, the men will start consecutively two weeks apart
Somebody dies, they'll be replaced.
There is no shortage of us.
Seventy five men have put their names forward.
For Christ's sake.
The announcement is being made today.
So, what makes this protest different is that you accept to die, Bobby ?
It may well come to that.
You start a hunger strike to protest for
for what you believe in.
You don't start already determined to die,
or am I missing something here ?
It's in their hands. Our message is clear.
They're seeing our determination.
So there'll be a couple of deaths, do you think, maybe five or six,
but you have seventy-five of you.
Aye, well, it won't come to that.
All right, maybe the Brits
will buckle after twenty or so.

But why should you care ?
Because you're already dead, right?
Have you thought about you're going to be putting these boys through ?
I mean, putting aside what's going to happen to these poor men's families.
You're going head to head with the British Government
who declaredly despise republicanism...
who are unshakeable.
They can easily live with the deaths
of what they call terrorists.
And the stakes are much higher this time.
I know that.
And if you're not even willing to negotiate,
you're looking for them to capitulate.
Is that it ?
Right.
So failure means many dead men, families torn apart,
and the whole Republican movement demoralised.
Aye. Worst case scenario it might well mean all that...
but in short term, under the ashes...
Come on !
guaranteed, there will be a new generation
of men and women,
even more resilient. More determined.
Look who you're talking to.
There's a war going on. I thought you
might understand. You're talking like a foreigner.
You're talking to me like I'm a foreigner.
Do you think I don't know Northern Ireland ?
I live here, man.
Then support us.
I supported the first hunger strike on the basis it was a protest.
Not some pre-design to die
and balk at negotiation
other than complete surrender from Thatcher.
That's ridiculous Bobby. It's destructive.
What's happened in here for the last four years ?
Brutality, humiliation.
Our basic human rights taken away from us.
All this must come to an end.
Through talking.
So what ?
We take their offer and put their uniform on ?
because the last four years are meant nothing ?
We can do that, Don,

or we can behave like the army
we proclaim to be
and lay down our lives for our comrades.
Is there not even small part in you
that's open for a breakthrough...
that could find you negotiating again ?
That won't happen.
Forget about that. I want to know whether
your intent is just purely to commit suicide here.
You want me to argue...
about the morality of what I'm about to do
and whether it's really suicide or not ?
For one in your corner it's suicide.
I call it murder.
And that's just another wee difference between us two.
We are both Catholic men.
Both Republicans.
But while you were poaching salmon
in lovely Kilrea,
we were being burnt out of our houses in Rathcoole.
Right.
Similar in many ways, Don, but life and
experience are focused up differently.
Do you understand me ?
I understand.
I have my belief and in all its simplicity,
that is the most powerful thing.
So what's your statement by dying ?
Just highlighting British intransigence, so fucking what ?
The whole world knows what the Brits are like.
Good.
Aye. It is good.
And it has nothing to do with you.
The Brits have been fucking up for centuries.
I can feel your hatred, Don.
Are you looking for martyrdom ?
No.
Are you sure?
Aye.
Because I've heard you eulogizing Wolf Tone,
McConnely, Mike Sweeney, all them men.
Don't talk thinking you're writing your
name in laurels for all them history books.
Oh, and you think that matters to me?

Aye, I know it does.
Well, you're wrong.
You say you're soldiers.
It's all about the freedom.
But you've got no appreciation
of a life, Bobby.
You no longer know what a life is, young man.
Four years living in these conditions, no one expects you to be normal.
There is nothing normal about you.
Right now the Republican
Movement has talked itself into a corner.
You and the IRA are standing right behind it looking into that corner. All
that history.
All them dead men and women.
You're still saying nothing.
And your answer is to kill everything. You've blinded yourself.
And you're scared to stop it.
Afraid of living,
afraid to talk in peace,
So what would Ulster be if it wasn't turning itself to shit ?
And this situation here,
the future of the Republican Movement
is in the hands of you men,
who have lost all sense of reality.
You think your head's on right ?
Locked up here 24 hours a day in piss and shit...
and you are making decisions
that could see so many men die ?
Build a statue to Bobby Sands.
You're joking me !
Freedom Fighter ?
They are the men and women
working out there in the community
and that was you once upon a time, am I right ?
All that work you did in Twin Brook.
That is where we need you, Bobby.
And you know I'm right.
But I'm deluded.
You want me to answer that ?
They're beating your ball, here. You're playing into their hands. The
strategy's in place.
Then stop it. Just say you'll stop.
You don't understand a thing.
You're in no shape to make this call.

It's done. It won't be stopped.
Then fuck it ! Life must mean nothing to you.
God's gonna punish me.
Well, if not just for the suicide, then he'd have to punish you for your stupidity.
Aye.
And you for your arrogance.
Because my life is a real life,
not some theological exercise,
some religious trick
that's got to fuck all to do with living.
Jesus Christ had a backbone,
but see them disciples, every disciple since ?
You're just jumping in and out of the rhetoric
and dead-end semantics.
You need the revolutionaries.
You need the cultural political soldier to give life a pulse...
to give life a direction.
This is stupid talk. You're deluded.
Aye. So you say.
And what's your wee son going to say ?
Fuck off.
Doesn't that interest you ?
You're going to attack me with sentiment ?
Typical priest.
What's your heart saying, Bobby?
I thought you had me all figured out, Don.
What is it saying ? Tell me.
My life means everything to me.
Freedom means everything.
I know that you don't mean to mock me, Don.
So I just let all that pass.
This is one of those times when we've come to a pause.
It's a time to keep your beliefs pure.
I believe that a united Ireland is right and just.
Maybe it's impossible for a man like you to understand.
But having respect for my life,
a desire for freedom,
an unyielding love for that belief,
means I can see past any doubts I may have.
Putting my life on the line is not just the only thing I can do, Don.
It's the right thing.
This is why you called me here.
Needed a sounding board ?

Not 100% sure of yourself.

Endebting yourself, maybe ?

Aye.

Well, I'm only human.

And I've made it clear for you, then.

Man of the guidance, Don. Business of the soul.

You been to Gweedore, in Donegal ?

Aye.

I went there when I was 12.

Big cross-country race for the boys.

And we were all in the back of a minibus headed towards Derry one morning.

I mean, this is big time.

I mean, this is like international athletics for us

because we were racing against boys in the South

and we had this thing to do Belfast pride.

A few boys were Protestants

and the rest of us were Catholics.

It was a cross-community event

I suppose the good people

in the south think this is great stuff.

Let's get this wee team over from Belfast

and all that patronizing shit.

Anyway,

we went through the border.

The boys singing pop tunes and all...

But I'm just in the back of the bus looking out the window,

we're going through the mountains. You know, where Mount Errigal is in them ?

It's a beautiful sight, Don.

Donegal is the most place in Ireland, I reckon.

Aye.

Anyway,

when we arrived at Gweedore... what a place. There were about 200 boys there.

getting into their gear and limnering up.

The whole event is run by

Christian Brothers and they're

clipping young fellows around in the back of the ears,

basically trying to obtain some order.

Our team goes off for a wee jog, to stretch out the legs.

And we're surrounded by fields of barley.

And I dip down into a wee valley where there's a stream

and woods running through it.

The woods and the stream are

out of bounds so, naturally,
us Belfast boys had to go check it, right ?
The woods and the stream seemed like the Amazon to us.
As we come across, these young fellows from Cork...
there's some banter about our accents...
They could barely talk we couldn't understand what they were saying.
You get the idea that they are lording it over us...
Looking down on us, I'm sensing it anyway.
We run along...
and we come up with this idea to go down
to the stream and check it out for fish...
So we went to the river, Don...
stream, and there's half a foot of water there...
and a silver fish, but nothing substantial.
until one of our boys calls us further down.
Lying in the water is a wee foal...
four or five days old. he was all skin and bone, a gray color.
And it's got flakes of blood in his coat because
he's cut himself up really badly in the sharp rocks...
We were standing over him and you could see his back legs snapped...
He's breathing, he's alive, but just about.
So this big conversation gets started up between
the boys who suddenly reckon themselves the leaders...
and deliberating as what we should do.
Someone says drop a rock on his head,
but I'm looking in their faces and I can see
they are either scared stiff or clueless.
It's all bravado.
And this foal on the ground in real pain.
All this chitchat going on going nowhere.
Next thing, one of the priests sees us, sees the foal,
tells us not to move it and that we were done for...
We were really done for.
Group of boys will always get the blame for hurting a foal.
A group of Belfast boys
will get a hammering for sure.
So it's clear to me in an instant.
I get down on my knees on my knees and take the
foal's head in my hands and I put him underwater.
He's thrashing around, so I press down harder until he's drowned.
The priests arrived, Don.
Just grabbing me by the hair, dragging me
through the woods, promising me a proper punishment.
But I knew I did the right thing by that wee foal.

and I could take the punishment for all our boys.
I had the respect of the other boys now. And I knew that.
I'm clear of the reasons, Don.
And clear of all the repercussions.
But I will act and I will
not stand by and do nothing.
You can leave them there if you like.
Don't want me rolling up the letter of St. John, do you ?
Couldn't have that in my conscience, no.
I don't think I'm gonna see you again, Bobby.
There's no need, Don.
"Faced now with the failure
of their discredited cause,
the men of violence
have chosen in recent months
to play what may well be their last card,
They have turned their violence against themselves
through the prison hunger strike to death
They seek to work on the most basic
of human emotions, pity,
as a means of creating tension
and stoking the fires of bitterness and hatred.
And from week one there has been a gradual deterioration
of the liver, kidney and pancreatic function.
Also the bone density decreases substantially due to calcium and vitamin
deficiencies.
The muscles of the heart
is also undernourished
causing impaired function
and eventually cardiac failure.
The left ventricle can shrink to 70%
of its normal size.
He will have low blood sugar, low
energy and muscular wasting.
He will be experiencing gastro- intestinal ulcers with the thinning
of the intestinal wall
and sub-mucosal hemorrhaging.
There will have been degenerative changes
to the mucous membranes of the intestines...
and indeed all the organs in the body.
UDA (Ulster Defense Alliance)

Name.

- Roselyn Sands.

Name.

- John Sands.

"People always ask us.

People always ask us.

Bobby, Bobby !

Who we are

And where we come from

And where we come from

And we tell them

And we tell them

We're from Belfast

We're from Belfast

The mighty, mighty Belfast

The mighty, mighty Belfast

And if they can't hear us

And if they can't hear us

we shout a little louder

We shout a little louder

Bobby Sands died after 66 days on hunger strike.

At that time he was elected to the British

Parliament M.P. for Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

After 7 months the strike was called off.

A further 9 men had died.

during the "blanket" and a "no-wash" protests.

In the following days and months,

the British Government effectively granted all the prisoners' demands

but without any formal

recognition of political status.