

Quiver

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; it was when it began to feel like it had left the inside of her mouth and throat as nothing more than a raw and bleeding flesh wound; when every morsel of food or sip of water felt like swallowing a razor blade, a writhing agony that only got worse when she stretched it into a scream; it was only then that Cathy Brennan phoned for the doctor.

In those weeks, as the pain intensified, she'd call Aoife or Damian over to her with a wee wave of the hand and reach into her apron pocket for a five-penny piece. Tucking it into Aoife's school pinafore or into the torn remnants of Damian's shirt pocket, she'd send one or the other scampering down the street to McGrath's on the corner to buy her an ice-pop. All different colours they were: blue, purple, green, orange, yellow, pink even. Aoife liked the purple ones best, whilst Damian favoured the green ones. Neither of them would ever even think to buy an orange one. Once they'd bought the ice-pop, 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. It would be kept there, between closed lips and beneath closed eyes, until all of 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 stand, snip the end of the ice-pop with the kitchen scissors and hand it to whichever of her children had run the message – either Aoife or Damian – so as they could squeeze the sugary slush out 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?'

Shay Brennan lifted his daughter onto his knee. 'It's what happens, wee girl,' he whispered. 'When you go touting to the peelers.' Then he grinned that grin that seemed to split

his face in two and built himself up to the rolling thunder of his gallery laugh by way of a chuckle and a cough or two.

‘Is that right?’ Aoife asked.

‘Not a word of a lie. It’s what happens when you turn 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’ after Mass one Sunday when he was having the craic with big 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 pinned her daughter’s head in against the silver cross at her chest and kept it pinned there with a firm hand. By lifting her chin a wee bit, so that the bulk of her mammy’s chest was beneath her eye-line, Aoife managed to squint out and see the whole thing. She’d seen the soldiers shoulder 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, as the soldiers crashed and shouted inside, and jumping from the sill – feet first like Hong Kong Phooey – onto the tiny square 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, in an unfamiliar accent, of ‘get your hands up, you bastard!’ She’d heard the shout, seen him limp on for a pace with his gacky half-run, and then heard the shot. Then she’d felt her mammy’s 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 was on a juddering bus. ‘It’s not that I liked him, love, or liked what he was doing, but he was a member of this community, is all.’

Aoife paused at that, her arm up around her daddy’s 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 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 gone to, Aoife,’ her daddy said. ‘If she had worries. Other people, other than the peelers.’

‘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 then, and cradled her cheek with the roughness of his hand. ‘These houses we’ve got, these wee houses – all in a row – they’re near enough bomb-proof, so they are. Remember what your mammy told you 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.’

It had been to the lady from the social work that Aoife’s mammy had said about Eamonn. A week or so before the shooting, it was. 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 as well, 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, as the two women nattered, 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.

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, though, 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.

Still, the woman from the social had taken away her wee nugget of information that day and she'd told someone else, and that someone else had told someone else in turn, until it reached the stage where – nine days later – Eamonn Kelly was spread out across the concrete with his arms splayed out to the side, as though he was trying to make a snow - angel and hadn't realised that it was springtime and that there was no snow. He'd have waited there, Aoife reckoned, until the snow came. Then his arms would have started to frantically flap, up and down on the whitened pavement, until he'd formed himself a set of wings. He'd have waited there, if the ambulance - men hadn't come and taken him away.

'She works for the Brits,' her daddy 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, then 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 one quart of dark 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. Further down the road, beside the peeler's 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 the wee spide 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 to her mammy, staring at the eyes that were rimmed with the red of blood and the make - up tracks that were scarred with the black of oil. Her mammy lurched to her feet, screwing her eyes so tightly

shut that the blue of them disappeared and they were all black and red, and felt her way across to the sink, using the worktop as a handrail. 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.

‘What are you doing downstairs, love?’ her daddy asked.

‘These windows face out towards the back,’ Aoife replied, in a whisper.

After that, Cathy Brennan had started with the ice-pops. Aoife and Damien took to racing home from school, in the hope of getting the five pence piece to run down to McGrath’s with. Aoife’s school – the convent – was closer to the family home, but Damien was the faster runner, so there were quite a few times when it was a photo-finish. Aoife didn’t even know what a photo-finish was, but she’d heard her daddy use the phrase a couple of times when he came out of the bog buckling his belt after hopping, half-cut, from foot to foot as he waited for Aoife or her mammy to finish in the bathroom.

Aoife and Damien were about equal with the ice-pop runs, purple versus green, when the steady supply of five-penny pieces stopped. It was Aoife that made it home first that day, near clattering into her mammy as she slid around the lino-corner into the kitchen. Her mammy wasn’t in the usual place, over by the sink, but instead was on her knees in front of the fridge. The butter and milk and all was spread out across the floor, taken out to give her enough space to get her head right in. Taking in the scene at a glance, Aoife caught on to what was happening and gave a panicked squeak. Rushing forwards, she clawed at her mammy’s cardigan until the hair-netted head came out of the fridge.

‘What are you at, Aoife?’ her mammy asked, a frown on her face like she’d caught Aoife at the biscuits before dinner was on the table.

‘You’re looking for a goose!’ Aoife shouted.

‘A goose?’ the frown deepened.

‘A chicken, then.’ Aoife didn’t know if a chicken could kill you like a goose could, but surely it was the same basic difference.

‘What are 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,’ a smile creased the forehead now. ‘But a fridge wouldn’t do that to you, now.’

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

‘Because my mouth’s near burnt off my face, so it is.’

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

‘No, love,’ her mammy shook her head, but she was laughing at the same time. ‘I’ll call for the doctor, maybe.’

It had been Aoife’s daddy that 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 whisky breath as her daddy told her how Caoimhe’s husband had been put in the Maze prison for planting a bomb down near Newry somewhere, then how Caoimhe had 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 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 it down?’

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

The pills certainly seemed to work for her mammy, anyway. In the late afternoon, Aoife and Damien would come home from school and run into the kitchen to find her at her old station by the sink. She'd just stand there, with her back to them and with 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 wee 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 tied to the sink was that Aoife and Damien 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 eighth 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. For her part, after her mammy had been taking the pills for two days, Aoife realised that she could reach up and take the biscuits from the cupboard beside the stove without it even 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 bated to the ropes and would be sprawled out on the sofa in the living room, watching the telly and nibbling on biscuits. Their mammy would still be stood in the kitchen, with her hands deep in the warm water, until her husband put his dirt-stained hands on her hips and walked her, dripping down onto the lino, across to the dining table.

It took about a week of this new way of things before Aoife started to grow scundered of it. 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 at the centre. Damien came in from school with a mucky blazer and Aoife needed 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 whisky on him and asked her to wet the tea leaves and put the chip pan on for their dinner. It took all of this, and more, for Aoife to grow scundered of it.

Then, that second weekend, between putting on the wash, running out to McGrath's for the messages, taking the dirty dishes up the stairs to the bathroom sink for washing, 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 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; 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 caught the arrow of her daughter's hatred, shuddered and then were still.