This Human Season

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When the soldiers came the time before, the father went off with them. He had the same name as his son, so he went in his place. After a few days he was released. Their son was far away by then, down south.

This time the son was in prison and they didn't want the father. So what could the father do, except stand in the front room, in his underpants, hands in the sagging pockets of his cardigan, watching the soldiers moving back and forth between the front and back doors of his home.

He was trying to think of something to say. His children and his wife were sat about in their nightclothes; they weren't looking at him.

'Yous think you know it all,' was what he'd told them up at Castlereagh, the interrogation centre, when they'd come to realize their mistake. The first day they'd had him hands against the wall, legs apart and when his knees weakened they'd shouted at him or kicked him. He'd not had anything he could tell them. Nor had he defied them. For two days they'd stopped him from sleeping, told him to sweep the hallway and when he'd sat down, they'd emptied out the bucket again and gone kicking the dust, cigarette butts, apple cores, and empty bleach bottles down along the corridor. Then they'd handed him back the broom. They let him go first thing on the third morning.

He'd got off lightly, he knew it, when he stepped outside, turned his collar up and set off, the sky all of one colour, a licked pale grey. It was a damp morning to come home on, and no one was about. He'd had to wait for the dinnertime session for the telling.

His son, Sean, had been inside Long Kesh for a month now. These men knew that. They were there because of the boy, because of where they lived, because they had another son and because they were Catholic.

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There was a stack of rifles on the living room floor. 'Don't you be touching those,' he said to his children in a low voice with a light whistle in it, the air from the open front door catching on his back teeth. 'They leave them there on purpose to see what the kids know.'

From upstairs came the sound of a door being forced, once, twice, and through. His wife shook her head.

'It's true,' said her husband. 'They do.'

The electric light was impotent, the daylight had taken over and so his wife got up to switch it off and pull back the curtains that gave on to their scrap of back garden – some grass, bare patches, a washing line with a pair of pants on it, legs sewn to hold pegs. To the right-hand side of the line, within the creosote armpit of a shed, was a gap that went through to the next street. The last time, she'd had a go at the soldiers when they came in, she'd jumped up to stall them, to make sure her son got away through that gap. She'd kept them then at the front door, offered them her husband herself. 'If it's Sean you're after, well here he is.' And sure enough they looked at the man in his jumper and Y-fronts and agreed he'd do. She, herself, had had him by one of his sleeves, shaking it.

'Who gave you permission to come in my house?' she said now.

'We've got all the permission we need,' said one, loafing by the sideboard, looking at her ornaments.

'You've got the guns is all.'

'We're not the only ones. Show us where you keep yours and we'll be away.'

'Liam, show the man your water pistol.'

Upstairs, they were crow-barring the floorboards, emptying drawers and cupboards. There wasn't a house in Ballymurphy that hadn't been pulled apart by the British Army. The soldier at the sideboard was going through those drawers, taking out chequebooks and bills, newspaper cuttings and photos. He left the drawers open, looked again, then picked up a black rubber bullet that was on the top shelf. It was about three inches long and an inch wide.

'Souvenir?' he asked her.

'Is it one of yours?' she asked. 'One just like that was fired into the face of my neighbour's boy. Fifteen years old. His mother's only son and now he can't even feed himself.' One of the soldier's boots came through the ceiling into the living room and a shower of brown dust came shooting down. 'Jesus, Joseph and Mary! And what if this was your own mother's home?'

'My mother didn't raise a terrorist,' said the soldier by the door to the hallway, leaning back, looking casual. He was tall, his back was straight, his eyes blue. He was

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in his twenties, smart in his uniform, his beret poised. There was a light white powder in the air. When her husband made to go into the kitchen, the soldier told him to sit down.

Those who'd been upstairs came clattering down the narrow stairway, one after the other until most of them were in the front room, filling it entirely, with two more in the hall. A shorter man stood in the doorway with his hands up above his head holding on to the frame.

'Clear, Sarge,' he said to the soldier at the sideboard.

This man, their sergeant, took a last look around the living room, taking in the vases and knick-knacks on the sideboard and mantelpiece, a small pale blue Madonna, a large conch sea shell, a few dark-coloured glass vases with gilt lettering, place names, a maple-leaf shaped piece of wood with 'Canada' carved on to it.

'You've got a nice home, Mrs,' he said. 'One of the cleanest I've been in anyway. Any chance of a cup of tea for the lads?'

'Go fuck yourselves,' she said.

Her younger son stood up beside her, the shoulders of his small frame rose and fell; with his mouth open, he was like a baby bird wanting to be fed.

'Starting him off young, are you?' said the sergeant. 'That's what you call infantry, that is.' He threw a look at the handsome soldier.

Kathleen pointed towards the door.

'Out, yous!'

They were in no rush. The sergeant took another look around, clapped his hands together, strolled across to the stairwell and gave the order. His men started to move themselves, gather the guns. The last one out was the handsome soldier, who looked up at the framed poster of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic on his way and tutted. He tipped the barrel of his rifle at the wife, touching her very lightly at her throat, where her dressing gown crossed. 'I bet you were one of them who used to be nice to us, once.'

Her cheeks flushed, Kathleen went to the front door to close it after them. She saw that the porch light had been smashed in. 'Ach for God's sake!' she called out, and started to shove the jarred door with fury and hurt.

'Harassment, that's all it is,' said her husband, coming up behind her, his voice growing as they watched the men going down the path and through the front gate. 'To keep us in our place ...'

'And what are you going to do about it?' she said, turning to him.

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He had a moment to look at her, her face backing into the new daylight, her neck stretching, a space between utterances, and he said nothing, paused between difficult things.

And then she was moving. 'Go up and get yourselves dressed,' she yelled at the children. 'Can't any of you do anything without me telling you?'

'Why did they come round here, Mummy?' said Aine, a brown envelope and a pen in her hands; she'd been sitting drawing pictures while the soldiers were there.

'Will you up and get yourself dressed, Aine, please. Don't make me say it again.'

'They'll be back again soon enough anyway.'

Upstairs, her brother, Liam, was taking two empty jam jars out from under his bed. 'You've to go in one, and I'll go in the other,' he told his sister.

'I can fill them both,' said the girl, 'I'm bursting now.'

'Just do the one.'

She went off towards the bathroom. Then she was back. 'What's it for, Liam?'

'For when the Brits come along by the side window, down the alleyway,' he said, pushing the cardboard box back under his bed.

Hearing her daughter fumbling with the bathroom lock the mother called up the stairs. 'For God's sake. No one's coming in to watch you peeing, Aine. We've got a television.'

The father was standing near the kitchen with his hands out, dripping water, shaking them just a little, waiting for his wife to show him the dishcloth.

Kathleen was bent in front of the television, tending to it. In her thin nightdress, her body was long, spare curves. The drone of the TV made a sudden acceleration, jumping from hum to chatter. The picture filled the screen; the outside world sprang.

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