

Nearly thirty years.

They approached each other cautiously. He offered his hand. She hesitated, then sat down. Their voices faltered through the hollow echo of a recently cleansed room. They took their places without physically connecting. There was a brief moment when they might have shaken hands but it froze over, ice too brittle to be stepped upon. He proffered a palm, hairy fingers but she couldn't bear it. She wasn't sure if he really meant it, if that outspoken gesture was genuine or an offence. He followed her eyes, equally unsure of how to read the proceedings.

Good morning

Good morning

You have made a big effort.

A hiss of frosted breath, long strung out on a burner, the push of a jaw scarred by fire, an arm cut off at the shoulder. It was difficult to handle, face to face. And of course there were the others who would never be there to refuse a handshake. Sometimes it would be easier to go back and be a nineteen year old with illusions and viciousness rather than dare the path of redemption offered by a broken body struggling to forgive. Victims of course always survive, in one shape or form; and so do their assassins, in one form or another. It is the surviving which makes a terrorist attack difficult. All out nuclear war had its attractions: there would be no one left to deal with the fall out.

I appreciate the fact you have come.

A big effort.

Yes. Indeed.

For many of us.

The room remained sterile, a neat, clinical reflection of their conversation, lacking warmth but very efficient in its layout. The table stood silently between them. One was led in by a guard, the other by a lawyer. There was little space to express the emotions that had been funneled into carefully compressed packages over the years. But it was a start. Neither had expected tea, coffee and buns, or even a beer and something to eat. The plastic chairs rattled on the uneven floor as they sat and broke eye contact in a burst of nervousness. They had to share the water bottle. They both fumbled with the plastic cups. Slowly, their words were forced to roll formally over the chainsaw that separated their souls, the conveyor belt they tried to jerk them into motion.

A weathered hand slipped a photo across the table, veins throbbing blue, red, under the heat, sighs of aggression. Her sleeve was carefully ironed, stiffly pointed, allowing no address.

Blood seeped, still alive after so many years. Unfocused snaps of terror lingered behind tired eyes, fresh as a daisy, stillborn as a magpie with no home to go to.

The prisoner looked grim. He picked up the image and stared into its entrails.

There are many more.

The prisoner just nodded.

They spoke for half an hour. There were no witnesses. No records. Victim and slayer faced each other, eye to eye, without touching, struggling for an angle, a point of view which would allow them see each other. It was a start. You can't be vengeful or maybe even remorseful all your life. Things happen. They always will. That may be an excuse. It may be all there is.

She could still remember the bomb going off, the scream she uttered through the glass of her third floor bedroom. Their daughter was getting ready for school. Husband and father: mother and daughter watched him explode into flames, flinging himself from the car to die in agony on their door step.

Had he too been watching? She couldn't bring herself to ask. Didn't really want to know if the man opposite had needed to watch his victim die or not.

And he didn't want to answer. Finding a way forward meant evading memories which could only burn, brand and stigmatize.

Nearly thirty years is a long time behind bars, even when they are cushioned with certain privileges. In nearly thirty years the internet had been invented, people had stopped going to the moon, Ryanair had taken off.

Time to leave. Sentence accomplished. The doors swung shut behind him one by one. Doris was waiting. Had been for all that time. Short, bit stubby, but she waved a hard grind of a smile that promised hope, a fresh start. Her hair had turned grey and she refused to dye it: what was the point polishing out the past. He agreed. Except you couldn't completely forget it either. Your body always carried the scars. He had seen them in the photos. A miracle. Nearly thirty years was a long time to remain faithful. The newly freed man didn't do calculations. Didn't want to know if faithfulness was a condition or a disease. Doris was waiting. All that mattered.

Sun broke the pavement with a clout of harshness. He'd been out on leave, his parents funerals, trips to hospitals. But it wasn't the same knowing you wouldn't be going back, that there was no police truck waiting around the corner.

He avoided the cameras. The snuggled him into a dark blue van. Cars change a lot in nearly thirty years. He wondered what the village would be like.

When he placed the bomb he hadn't really thought of the children. In fact he wasn't thinking at all. Except he was. But you think differently after nearly thirty years. And you think differently when you are nineteen and enthusiastic. And it isn't the punishment but the crime that reshapes you, takes on a new form; or

it doesn't and you remain the impulsive teenager who refuses to grow up and recognize the complexities that you don't see when you are Peter Pan fighting Captain Hook. Black and white blurs as your eyesight ages and reading glasses cannot be avoided.

He was finally going home. Prison had shielded him from nearly thirty years, locked him away from reality. After nearly thirty years there was no choice but to try beginning all over again. He just hoped the ghosts felt the same. Nothing very civil about war. Doris gripped his hand. She knew what was out there waiting for him. She'd thirty years more experience.

The wind was bitterly cold. Prison had been air conditioned: he'd forgotten the insistence of that northern breeze, the hint of hail as it spread in and built up courage for a night of howling.

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