

Condemned

(3407 words)

I could smell smoke. It seemed to have escaped the notice of the guards even though there was a growing sound of excitement from elsewhere in the prison block. Some prisoners would trade and smoke tobacco and other substances smuggled into the prison, but this was different. More like paper or varnished wood burning.

The noise from the “common room” was increasing. At certain times, the guards encouraged prisoners to spend time there to give us some degree of social contact, but I preferred to stay in what, in former times, would have been my “condemned cell”.

I was daydreaming, and trying to find some peace of mind, when a guard came into the cell. “The governor wants to see you.”

“Do you know what it’s about?” I asked.

“I think he wants to offer you a job in the kitchen.”

I was puzzled. Kitchen jobs were not readily offered to those newly convicted of murder. “Why me?”

The commotion was becoming more rowdy.

“He didn’t say. Just that your behaviour is not – er – ...”. My guard was looking around anxiously, uncertain what to do about the disturbance, “... not typical of the other inmates.”

Smoke was drifting into my cell, there was the sound of breaking furniture and cries of pain as the angry shouting and swearing erupted into a full-scale brawl.

It was wise not to make things difficult for the guards, so I stood up to be handcuffed, but as the guard reached for the cuffs, an inmate ran past my cell door pursued by another with some sort of weapon. The guard glanced anxiously back at me and then took to the chase, drawing his truncheon.

Someone had started a fire and the whole prison block was filling up with smoke. Everyone panicked – even the guards. The noise and shouting was deafening. An alarm sounded, and then another. Guards shouted confusing orders sending people running in all directions. Amid this chaos, they were trying to corral the visitors ready to escort them from the prison. I slipped into a toilet, turned my prison clothes inside out, and then mingled with the increasingly fearful group of visitors. They were coughing and trying to protect their ears and eyes from the noise and choking fug. I did the same, as the guards hurried us out of the prison grounds.

Once outside, breathing the fresh air and taking in the sense of space and freedom, I told myself that was a stupid thing to do. They're bound to catch up with me.

I had no support outside the prison, and despite a profitable – if not entirely ethical – career in computer technology, I had no money and no possessions. Nevertheless, in the quiet of the afternoon, the stress quickly drained away. I had little to lose by having perhaps an hour or two of freedom. This could be my lucky day.

A short distance ahead of me young children were finishing school for the day and meeting their parents. I quickened my pace to hide among the groups of parents and children, but as families peeled off, the groups thinned out, and I eventually found myself followed by a single child. I guessed she was about ten years old.

“Hello,” I said. I wondered how I might use her to find a safe house, but quickly rejected the idea. That was not what I wanted.

“You’ve escaped, haven’t you?” she demanded.

Alarmed, I said, “Sh! Don’t tell anyone. You can share my little secret,” sounding as benign as possible. “How did you know?”

She didn’t answer, but said, “Hold my coat ... and carry my schoolbag.” She seemed to be giving me orders.

“Hasn’t anyone told you not to speak to strangers? Why should I carry your things?” I was putting on an air of mock defiance.

“Don’t be stupid,” she said. “It’s so people think you’re my dad. What were you in prison for, anyway?”

“Murder.”

She seemed innocently unfazed, but fixed her eyes on my face. “You don’t look like a murderer,” and then added pensively, “but I don’t really know what murderers look like.”

“I’ve seen a few,” I explained, “and none of them looked a bit like me. And, anyway, I didn’t do it but nobody believes me.”

“I think ... I think I believe you.” After a pause, she added “You look a bit like my dad, and he was a kind man – and handsome. But I can’t remember him really.”

“Well, thank you. Nobody has ever said I was handsome before. Where do you live?”

“Over there next to the building site. Do you like my school uniform?”

“It suits you. I think it’s very nice.”

“No it’s not! I hate it! Mum makes me wear it when we go to the doctor’s.”

I thought it best to change the subject. “The workmen have gone home. I’ll go and hide in there.”

“You can’t stay there. It’s the first place they’ll look.”

“The police? How do you know?”

“That’s where they all hide. Escaped prisoners, I mean. Anyway, that’s what the grown-ups say to frighten us kids.”

“Why do they want to frighten you?”

“So we don’t go and play in there. One boy thinks there’s a bogeyman in there. He’s silly.”

“Never mind,” I replied, perhaps over condescendingly considering her forward nature, “I was going to give myself up anyway.”

“Why?” She seemed disappointed.

“It’s no fun being on the run, and I’m lost and broke without my computer.”

“I haven’t got a computer, but Mum has. It’s too big to carry out – oh, and it needs to be plugged in – and an internet connection.”

“I see.” I dismissed any thought of using the computer, as I didn’t have enough time to do anything useful. “What does your mum use it for?” I asked, making conversation.

“She doesn’t use it anymore and she’s just miserable all the time.”

“Why is she miserable?”

“Mum has got depression. She’s had it ever since my dad died when I was four. What’s depression?”

“It’s when you’re so sad that you need medicine for it.”

“She takes drugs as well. She says she wants to give it up and get away from all the dangerous dealers and addicts.”

“Oh,” I said, a little shocked at what she was going through.

“She’s afraid they’ll corrupt me and make me do bad things.”

This troubled little girl clearly needed someone to talk to, and she continued to unburden herself until her gaze fell upon my shabby-looking prison clothes.

“You are right. These clothes will get me noticed,” I said, without knowing her real thoughts.

The girl’s face lit up for just a moment. “If you hide in the building site for now I’ll run home and bring you some of dad’s old clothes.”

“That’s very kind of you. I’m sorry about your mum.”

After a thoughtful pause, she asked, “Why don’t they believe you?”

I explained, as simply as I could and without being too horrifying, that I had walked in on a robbery just as two or three men slipped out through another door. The shop manager had been working late and these thugs had, apparently, tortured him until he opened the safe and then killed him for fear he could identify them. I tried and failed to revive the man, and was standing there gazing at the bloody scene, incapable of rational thought, when the police arrived. I had blood on my hands and clothes. The police thought I’d killed the man in a fit of rage on finding the safe was empty.

We reached the building site and I finished my account. My new friend looked downhearted, but without warning, she ran off.

“Hey, wait! What’s your name?” I called, but she kept on running. Would she tell the police? I thought she wouldn’t, but that her mum might. I didn’t expect to see her again, except that she left her belongings.

While she was gone, I sat on a pile of bricks and had a look in her schoolbag. There was a booklet that she had obviously made herself, with a short illustrated poem on each page. It confirmed in my mind that she was a very clever little girl. The booklet had twelve pages, which gave me an idea. From memory, I wrote a single word on each page. If the girl’s mother knew enough about computers, she might make sense of these words, and their significance would not be lost. I was in no position to make use of them myself, but somehow I needed to put the computer into the mind of the girl’s mum. If the police got hold of the little book, they wouldn’t think it meant anything.

When the girl returned she brought a coat and two biscuits to share. She shuffled herself onto my makeshift seat beside me. Her confidence in me was touching and I couldn't help contrasting her with the seven-year-old Pip in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. "Tara," she said with a smile as if answering the question I'd asked twenty minutes earlier.

"Desmond," I replied, "Des. Thanks for the coat. Doesn't your mum mind?"

"No. That's OK. She's been meaning to throw it out for ages."

Tara, for once, was avoiding eye contact, and I had the impression she was not telling the whole truth. Surely, the police should be here now, not Tara, and why did her mum allow her to come back here anyway?

"Well, thanks, but don't you know it's against the law to help escaped prisoners?"

"That's ok. They won't punish me because I'm only ten years old." After thinking about it, she added, "They might think you're a paedo, though." And we both laughed.

I was thinking what a wonderful little girl to have around and how lucky I was to meet her at a time when I faced the rest of my life in isolation and despair. This really was my lucky day.

"If they catch you, they'll ask lots of questions, so just tell the truth," I advised, but added, "I had a look at your poetry book. What's your favourite poem?"

"I quite like my own poems, but there's one about King Henry or something chewing bits of string."

I laughed. "You mean Henry King, don't you?"

"He died in the end," Tara replied, but I don't think the other children know that because he – you know, the person who wrote it – used a different word."

"*Expires*," I said. "Oh, and it was Hilaire Belloc."

"Will they kill *you*?" Tara asked. She suddenly looked serious, turned to me and stared deep into my eyes as only children can. She was trying to read me. "Are you going to the electric chair?"

"No." I tried to sound reassuring. "We don't have the electric chair in this country, but I did have a dream about it."

Her expression didn't change. "Are they going to hang you then?"

“No. They’ll just lock me up for a very long time.”

Tara relaxed her gaze. “That’s a pity,” she remarked sadly.

“A pity I’m not going to the electric chair or a pity they’re not going to hang me?”

Tara perked up. “No, silly! You seem too nice to go to prison. I think my mum would like you.”

“Make sure your mum has a close look at your poems and drawings. Why not ask her how to put them on her computer?”

“OK, but what’s *your* favourite poem?”

I had no hesitation. “*The Lake Isle of Innisfree* by W B Yeats. I learnt it when I was at school, but I didn’t like it then.” I gave her the first line, *I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,* and then described the poem, quoting my two favourite lines: *And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow, Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings.*

To my surprise, Tara suddenly jumped up, grabbed her coat and bag and ran off as if she had forgotten an appointment or had just had a brilliant idea. “Thanks for carrying my things,” she shouted back. “You can keep the coat.”

Obviously, I knew I couldn’t keep the coat, as the authorities would trace it back to Tara and her mum and they could be in trouble with the law, so I folded it neatly and left it where we were sitting.

I made my way slowly and sadly back to the prison, hoping that my voluntary return might mitigate my punishment. My encounter with Tara had reminded me how much I would miss life outside, but at least I had potentially done Tara and her mum a favour. The true villains might be caught if they commit more crimes. Perhaps there would be someone to visit me during my gloomy future.

Calm had returned to the prison. The fire was out and all the prisoners were locked in their cells, but as a guard led me back to my cell, I worried about the coat. I should have made Tara take it home, or hidden it carefully.

It seemed that the prison governor had changed his mind about offering me a kitchen job, and was now busy interviewing the troublemakers to find out who was responsible for the fighting and the fire, and whether the disturbance had anything to do with my escape.

I expected to be punished, but nothing happened for three whole weeks. Then a guard came into my cell. “The governor wants to see you.”

"This is it," I thought. "Solitary confinement." I put my hands forward ready for the handcuffs, but the guard held open the door for me to go first. I felt I even detected a glimmer of a smile on the guard's stern face.

In the governor's office, the governor indicated I should sit down. I hesitated.

"Please sit down, Mr Howard," he began.

He had never called me "Mr" before, and I was so surprised I blurted out, "Desmond ... Sir."

"Later, perhaps, but for now it's Mr Howard. Mr Howard, it looks like you're going to be released."

"Really?"

"Er – yes, really. The police have had an anonymous tipoff from a witness, who saw three people leaving the shop just as you looked in and the police arrived. It's beginning to look as if you were telling the truth all along. The informant recognised one of the three, and forensic evidence corroborates her story."

"*Her* story!"

"Er, yes. I didn't mean to say that, but, yes, the police think the informant was a woman. I understand there have been two arrests and some money has been recovered."

"I don't know what to say. Thank you, Sir."

"I was going to offer you a job in the kitchens, but after your escape, I couldn't do that, as it would look bad to the other inmates."

"I understand, Sir."

"You will have to go back to your cell for now and wait for developments."

I returned to my cell with a great feeling of anticipation and excitement.

The morning of my release was, however, a long time coming. The governor summoned me to his office. "The governor wants to see you."

The governor began, "Good morning, Desmond. I would like to wish you the best of luck in the outside world and apologise for my part in your incarceration. You should eventually receive some compensation for your time here, but in the meantime you can collect a small sum on your way out to get you started, along with your passport and personal effects."

“Thank you, Sir. I hardly ...”

“No need for that,” he interrupted. “Oh, by the way, a little girl brought this coat to the prison. She said it belonged to Mr Desmond. How is that possible?”

“I – er – vaguely know the family, Sir,” I lied, dreading the next question.

“Can you explain how it found its way onto a building site?”

“Sorry, Sir ... I don’t understand.” I put on a puzzled expression, but I knew he had tricked me into admitting I knew something about the coat and a little girl..

“Well, as a matter of fact it wasn’t brought by a little girl,” he continued with a smirk. “A builder found it the day after your little escapade and handed it to a prison officer on his way to work. The builder had heard that a murderer was on the run. The way people talk around here, you’d think prisoners were escaping all the time and hiding on that building site.”

“Ah,” I said, wondering how much he really knew.

“I personally made some enquiries and found that the owner died in a road accident six years ago, but as you – er – *vaguely know the family*, you already knew that.”

The governor was enjoying making me squirm, but in the end, he let me off lightly.

He continued, “Nevertheless, I think you should have it.” Then he opened his desk drawer and took out a child’s book of poems.

I recognised the book instantly, and had a rush of blood to my head. Were Tara and her mum in trouble? Had the authorities discovered the twelve-word key?

The governor was calm and precise. “I wanted to give you this personally. It really was delivered by a zippy little girl as soon as your impending release hit the news. Apparently, she arrived in a taxi, accompanied by a woman who remained seated, as the little girl jumped out.”

Written on the cover in a child’s handwriting, I read, “*Arise and go now, and go to Innisfree.*” My eyes flooded with tears.

The governor stood up, walked round his desk and handed me a tissue. “Someone you know?” he asked sardonically.

“Yes, a very special little girl.”

“As you’re not guilty of a crime, I’m letting you out earlier than usual so you can avoid the reporters. The little girl insisted on knowing the exact time of your release.”

As I left the room, he added, with a handshake and a self-satisfied grin, “Remarkable little thing, that girl, considering what she’s had to put up with. Shame about her dad.”

I looked at him for a moment, but he was giving nothing away. If he thought Tara’s mum had given me the coat on the building site, he had decided to take a lenient view. I nodded and left.

Outside the prison, a taxi was waiting. The door opened for me to get in. I immediately recognised Tara, not in her school uniform, but wearing a bright summer dress, and there was a well-dressed woman I assumed was Tara’s mum. This was not how I imagined her.

“The airport, please,” the woman told the driver.

“Where are we going?” I asked, puzzled.

“We are booked into the Clayton Hotel in Sligo, a few miles from Lake Innisfree. That was Tara’s idea.”

Once again, I had to dry my eyes with the governor’s tissue.

“Thank you for the twelve-word bitcoin key,” she added. “I never would have got it if Tara hadn’t asked about the computer. We’re very rich now.”

“Well, I had nothing to lose and Tara was the only person who believed me.” I exchanged a smile with Tara. “I had to hide the key in case the police found out too much. You could have been in trouble if they thought you had helped me.”

“When Tara wanted her dad’s coat, she said she was playing dressing up with a friend.” She turned to Tara with a mock reprimand. “Didn’t you, Tara?” Tara grinned sheepishly.

I laughed. Now I understood. “You would never have let her out to talk to a complete stranger who had just escaped from prison!”

Tara’s mum continued, “When Tara finally told the truth, I knew straight away you weren’t the murderer.”

“Was it you who tipped off the police, then?” I queried.

“Er, yes,” she admitted.

I was thinking out loud, “The prison governor must have guessed it was you, and that’s why he decided not to chase you about the coat – because you already knew I was not the murderer.”

“I wasn’t really a witness, of course, but I know all the villains and junkies around here, and I had a pretty good idea who the thugs were, so when all those bitcoins appeared, I decided to help.”

With that, we all laughed, and continued to laugh all the way to the airport.