

It happened one morning

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Clear starlit night.

Mary Bell, unable to sleep, rises to visit the toilet. Then, so as not to disturb her slumbering husband, she moves into the living room.

A glance between the verandah curtains – beyond, the dark sea is calm. Gentle waves glisten below her fourth floor vantage point. Occasional lights flicker from distant boats. A seabird calls.

All is peaceful.

She settles into the living room armchair to work through the papers in some red boxes.

Enormous rush of air! Curtains fly outwards. *Ear-shattering boom!* The building shakes. Ceiling starts to fall.

Thrown onto carpet by a huge thumping force.

Mary's mind struggles back to consciousness. *Numb. Tingling.* She pushes her right thumbnail into a finger. *Sensation.* She moves her hand onto her stomach and then her legs. *All still there.* Left hand moves to her face. *Wet, sticky.*

What has happened? She forces her mind to think. Eyes slowly open. *Everything blurry.* Where the verandah windows had been – *gone*, no curtains, no glass sliding doors – just the dark void of sky beyond.

Michael? Asleep in the bedroom? She tries to call. *Voice seems to croak.* Can't hear! *Sharp pain in head.*

She rolls onto her side. A siren starts to blare. She can hear that.

Voices.

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‘Michael,’ she calls again.

‘Mary,’ is the reply. ‘Where are you?’

Another voice. ‘Prime Minister. Mrs Bell. Where are you?’

The siren continues to whine. More wailing sirens beyond the verandah, from down in the street.

‘Here,’ Mary shouts. ‘Living room floor.’

She glances at her wristwatch. 2.54am. *Stabbing pain in her head.* The security detail is present. A doctor is assisting her.

It is October 1984. George Orwell couldn’t have envisaged this in his wildest dystopian dreams. Most of the Government Cabinet have been killed or maimed by an explosion that has destroyed a whole section of the Grand Hotel.

By some miracle, the Prime Minister and her husband have survived. A huge chimney stack had collapsed through the bathrooms on five floors, including hers, destroying everything in its path.

As dawn approaches, Prime Minister Mary Bell is briefed by her police and security advisors. Apparently, a bomb had exploded in a bathroom on the sixth floor, directly above the Prime Minister’s fourth floor suite – an attempt to assassinate the prime minister and as many of her ministers as possible.

Never before had any lethal threat come even close to the prime minister although, for many months, the terrorists had been killing, wounding and petrifying many softer targets.

A final line has now been seriously crossed.

How to find the culprits and deal with the situation?

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Home Secretary, Jeremy Davidson, has escaped the blast. A former high-ranking army officer and now minister responsible for supervising domestic security, he is a solid well-built man with a reputation for no-nonsense treatment of law breakers.

So Mary Bell's eyes widen as Davidson says, 'Prime Minister, I know your first response will be to fight back against the perpetrators and crush them all.' A slight pause. 'But, on this occasion, over-reaction might not be the wisest way forward.'

The prime minister growls. 'Who did this, Jeremy? I want them. I want them all. They will pay dearly.'

Davidson gives a polite cough. 'We don't yet know, Prime Minister, but we could reasonably suspect that it has come from dissident terrorists who want to secede from our rule.'

The prime minister recoils as she touches the medical dressing on the left side of her head but she juts her jaw and shouts at her minister. 'What are you saying? I want to intern all suspects – no charges required. Gather them up. Let them feel our pain and outrage. They will talk. No honour amongst those criminals. Jeremy, a lot of our friends, colleagues and their families have died in this terrible act of violence here tonight. It is treason against Her Majesty's government. No-one is safe if this goes unpunished.'

'Yes, Prime Minister, I absolutely understand your fury. But ...'

'No buts, Jeremy! Do as I say!!'

As he leaves, he notes the seeping blood stain on her bandages.

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Margaret Smythe-Hamilton is president of the ruling Conservative Party. A tall dignified business woman and international diplomat in her own right, she has been sitting with the prime minister for many minutes now – empathising, commiserating and calming.

In the cold light of this October morning, the reckoning has seven cabinet ministers dead, plus four wives of ministers. Another twenty-eight members of staff have been injured, some so seriously they may never walk again. The prime minister, herself, has a serious head wound but she has refused any further medical attention.

‘Believe me, Mary, I understand your pain and anger. This is a terrible loss and an unforgiveable assault on our democracy itself. But ...’

‘No buts, Margaret! I won’t hear of anything less than full retribution – indeed revenge.’

‘But, Mary, you yourself have been injured.’ Margaret points at the bandaged head wound. ‘Take some care. The doctors advise prompt surgery to repair that damage. Slow down.’

Mary Bell shudders at pulsing pain. ‘Definitely not! People must see we are strong! As we speak, Jeremy is organising the round-up of these murderers. Our just vengeance will teach them never to tangle with us again.’

‘Mary,’ Margaret’s gentle voice murmurs. ‘I would ask you to reconsider this course of action. We will catch and punish the culprits, according to law. But I need you to consider the longer term view ... beyond politics, beyond a knee-jerk need for swift justice.’

Mary Bell takes a deep breath. ‘What?’ With a quiet snarl, she says, ‘You challenge my authority. I am Prime Minister of this country. I am the elected

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leader of our people.’ Her voice rises in intense indignation. ‘No-one will divert me from this course of action. We will allow no weakness on our part. We will make such an example of these evil vermin that no-one – no-one ever again – will dare to challenge our right to govern in peace.’

Mary Bell slumps back in her chair, sighing from her effort.

The president of the Conservative Party nods sadly in the face of such a passionate tirade. ‘Mary, you are not well. The doctors will look after you for a while.’

It is now 1985. Months of turmoil have followed the funeral of Prime Minister Mary Bell, who finally succumbed to the brain injury from the bomb explosion. Her seven deceased cabinet members have been laid to rest. Mourning families have expressed their grief and anger. The injured have tried to stay out of the media spotlight.

A culprit, who admitted planting the bomb, has been charged along with his alleged accomplices.

The new Prime Minister, Jeremy Davidson, elected by his party to replace the late Mary Bell, is meeting with the monarch at the palace.

‘Do I understand, Prime Minister, you are suggesting we let our Northern Ireland subjects secede from the United Kingdom?’

‘Yes, Your Majesty. What we are doing in that province is not working. We’ve been deploying our armed forces there for years against a domestic insurgency because it is beyond our normal police force. My recommendation is not significantly different from our withdrawals in many of our African Commonwealth countries or India.’

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The Queen controls a gasp. ‘With respect, I think it is very different. The United Kingdom is a union of four countries. You are suggesting we break that union.’

‘Indeed, Your Majesty.’ Davidson gives a protocol-polite head-bow. ‘I know Ireland was in the Union from 1801, reduced to just Northern Ireland in 1922 – but the world has changed. We can’t sweep our armies right through countries to subdue uprisings like we once did in India, Asia and Africa. As one of my predecessors stated in 1960, there are winds of change moving through areas we once claimed, whether we like it or not. Why should Northern Ireland cost so many lives now?’

The Queen raises her hand. ‘But, Prime Minister, I’m not only the monarch ... I’m also the head of the non-Catholic Anglican church. The Unionists in Northern Ireland are protestants and they consider themselves British. This is not just a stroke of a pen. These issues are deep and complex.’

‘I agree. Our presence in Ireland goes back to Henry VIII’s Tudor conquest. Even before, to Anglo Normans conquering vast areas during the 12th century – and ever since, rebellions against English domination have happened regularly. I appreciate that, in James I’s reign, a plantation of protestants was established in Ulster to resist the supremacy of Rome’s papacy. I get all that, including the significance of William III winning the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. But, how long do we continue to combat uprisings for a sovereignty based on centuries-old colonial decisions?’ He sighs. ‘When do we say “Enough is enough”?’

‘Sir, you are suggesting I become the British monarch who allows the demise of the United Kingdom and all it has stood for.’

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‘Ma’am, we are no longer the Great Britain of our colonial imperial days. You are the head of a prosperous Commonwealth of Nations which recognises the traditions of the past – spiritual as well as economic and political. We also need to be part of this modern world in terms of democracy – recognising the majority will of the people. I accept this is a bold step forward but our Irish peace will come from shared values and freedom rather than military might.’

The monarch sits back in her chair and steeples her fingers. ‘I trust you note the irony in your proposal. Aren’t we just conceding to the might of terrorists?’

‘Ma’am, I would prefer to say that we acknowledge the realities of today’s world. This is not Queen Victoria’s Empire. We have accepted self-determination in most of our past colonies.’

Tapping her fingers rapidly, the Queen’s voice rises. ‘But we are deserting British subjects in Northern Ireland.’

‘Your Majesty, we are part of a European Economic Community, as is the Republic of Ireland. Someday, we will all officially become a political Union of European states. Northern Ireland citizens could hold multiple national allegiances and continue to practise the religion of their choice. We need to step away from revisiting injustices and grievances from the past and embrace a more generous collective future.’

‘This will cost you the next election and perhaps many more, you realise?’

‘It’s not about me or popularity. We need a way forward with hope and realism.’

‘Well, I think the grudges will always be there.’ She humphs. ‘Nevertheless, as sovereign, I am required to accept your proposal if it is the will of the people – but I confess I don’t much like this changing world in which we live.’

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After the maelstrom of public debate, Unionist boycotts, media hyperbole and a speedy plebiscite in Northern Ireland, the British parliament finally agrees by the smallest of margins to recognise the majority decision in the public vote ... and allow Northern Ireland to become part of the Republic of Ireland from January 1987.

The outgoing prime minister, Jeremy Davidson, is visiting the Queen to tender his official resignation and retirement from politics. His party has lost the general election, as predicted, and he is tired.

Her Majesty greets the prime minister in the first floor audience room.

‘Well, congratulations, I suppose, on staying a hard course. Time will tell how successfully our people can move forward with a completely independent Ireland. Your advice was indeed bold and unexpected but it seems to be working so far. I wish you well for your future.’ She smiles graciously. ‘Although, I must point out that our previous prime minister, Mary Bell, apparently saw that terrorist atrocity on the south coast to be “a line in the sand”.’

Jeremy Davidson gives a wry grin. ‘Indeed, Ma’am. It probably was – and the tides of change arrived to wash that line into “the sands of time”.’