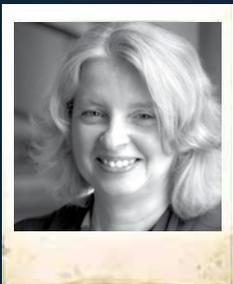


POLICE LINE DO

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Eina McHugh is on her way to therapy when she finds the streets outside her therapist's office cordoned off by police. It's Belfast, 1991, and shootings,

bombings and beatings are a ubiquitous feature of life in Northern Ireland



DO NOT CROSS

o live

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die together”*

Reading the newspapers you would think the only people in therapy were the trendy intelligentsia of New York's Greenwich Village or the middle classes of London's Primrose Hill. Yet there I was, in battered Belfast, scraping together every penny to go to a room with a couch and a circle. Most of the time was spent attending to the scars of what it was to be human and wounded – in that our conversations were no different to those exchanged in multiple languages across the globe. However, some moments in the process belonged to Northern Ireland, to Sinn Féin, to Ourselves Alone.

Near J's office a bevy of police officers are turning back pedestrians. White police tape trails across a street, like wayward ribbon escaped from a wedding cake. A rogue car sits in splendid isolation.

'Sorry, love. You can't go down there.'

Word is going around the gathering crowd that bomb scares are all over the city. I run down a side street. Another cluster of dark-green uniforms appears. I am getting worried: what if J's building has been evacuated too? There is a third possible route. Bored people are milling outside offices, fags and umbrellas in hand. J's office comes into sight, beyond the clutch of tape, on the right side of freedom.

His turret room is removed from the street chaos below.

'You must have been frightened, yet you still came.'

It is as if J is communicating: *You're allowed to be frightened. Trust me. I can hold you in this.* And, with the accumulated stress of my attempts to get there, combined with the anxiety that I would not make it, the tears flow.

Daddy's mad with fear. 'Get down on the floor.' I'm huddled in giggles, beside my sister. Crack, crack. It sounds like Christmas crackers, only better. It's so silly. Shouts are in the street, people running. I'm not laughing any more. There is a horrible, sick feeling in my tummy.

Daddy is crawling to the door, disappearing into the night street to check what is happening. Daddy, don't leave us. He won't listen. I can't remember my prayers. I get the lines mixed up, so I have to keep it simple: 'I promise, God, I'll do the washing-up and the drying and the garden and anything you want. Just make Daddy come back to me and make the noise stop.'

The next morning, it's on the news. A woman shot dead near our house. A gift falls into my cornflakes. The plastic wrapping is hard to open. It's easy to pretend I'm not listening because Mummy has that low whisper on her that means 'This is not for the children.' She's saying, 'Brendan, what are we going to do?'

There was a chaotic feeling in the group, with helicopters prowling outside and several members arriving late because of police checkpoints.

Someone had heard a news bulletin about suspected trouble. J mentioned in the opening minutes something about what did members need to do in order to be fully present?

As the group got started, I silently fretted: *What if the area is being cleared without us knowing? What if a bomb goes off, and showers of glass fall on top of me because I'm sitting near the window?*

'J, can I use your phone to ring the police?'

I had cut right across the flow of the group. J did not respond. He kept that infuriating analytical impassiveness going, as if he might deign to reply to me in an hour's time, when he had thought through the precise psychological meaning of my question. Or maybe he was challenging me: 'What are you going to do if I don't give you the authority you are investing in me?'

I thought, *he doesn't know what can happen when people forget you.*

It was that time before mobile phones. What should I have done? Bloody well stood up and defiantly used his phone, potentially antagonising him more? Or sat on, the capacity to act freezing over? Or got up and said, 'I don't feel safe here,' and, if the others had refused to leave, left anyway?

But if the bomb had gone off, I could not have lived with myself. I would have betrayed them. So, at least if we stayed together, we would die together.

All this was taking place in my mind within seconds. Suddenly rage infused me, and the odd thought, *I can't let myself die like this again.*

'Right. I'll ring from the street.'

Before there could be any reaction, I had slung on my coat and was tripping down the stairs, once more defying group etiquette.

An army patrol car was in the street.

'Yes, there's a suspect bomb,' the soldier told me.

'We're up there,' I said, pointing to J's office.

'Well, you're on the boundary of the cleared area. It's up to you whether you stay or leave.'

When I returned to the group, I passed on the soldier's information. We decided to stay. It was the North; the task of assessing probabilities was constant. But J continually looked for opportunities to develop dialogue about the ubiquitous violence in Northern Ireland, while we, random representatives of the population, ignored it, pretending that we were living in Birmingham and that what was going on – shooting, bombing and beatings – was normal, which it had almost become by 1991.

J possessed a moral fury that had not gone underground. However, his was an arduous task because it was dangerous to open up politics in a society where you had to be careful about self-revelation, where the skill of protecting yourself by interpreting linguistic and cultural codes had been ingrained from childhood.

He was developing some of his thought-provoking themes, about what happened when the dialogue stopped and the killing took over,

and the immaturity of some of our local politicians who had let us down. What were we unconsciously letting the terrorists carry for us and could we take that projection back and deal with it, learn to think and talk in a society where thinking and talking were floundering, with horrific consequences?

On a bad day I would get caught up in my internal spider's web and hear that I was being personally blamed for the entire history of the Troubles, that it was *all my fault* that taxi drivers were being taken up alleyways and murdered. I would also get annoyed, hearing that it was primarily psychotherapists (or him) who were committed to change, whereas I knew many people in my own creative community working hard for peace.

Yet it was the first time I had ever heard anyone putting forward a cohesive premise for the craziness abounding, which, surely, could not be explained solely in political terms. J was commenting on the unconscious dynamics linked to power in Northern Ireland, wondering if what was taking place in the group might relate to this. What he was implying was that the members looked to him, as the seat of authority, to sort things out, without themselves taking on individual responsibility. While there might have been a fundamental truth in his proposition, I felt enraged and denied.

'I was taking on responsibility. You wouldn't even answer me when I asked if I could use your phone.'

It was turning into one of those nights when I would experience J as the most insufferably smug and condescending of gits. He started pontificating that, in circumstances of fear and confusion, politeness was no longer required.

'So I was expected to change my behaviour, but yours remained the same?' I argued. If he represented government, he had the hypocrisy of the British government, the way there was no such thing as proper voting – *getting angrier* – there was no real democracy, it was all a pretence. Reaching down into fury, I hurled at him, 'I feel completely disenfranchised.'

J replied, so superciliously removed from the emotional fray that I hated him for it, 'That's why you're in therapy.'

I heard him telling me that I did not have a right to feel what I felt, that my feelings were the product of my screwed-up world that he was dismissing from on high.

'Don't you ever fucking do that again!' I shouted at him.

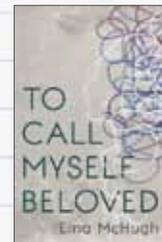
It was unheard of for me to curse in the outside world, yet I was letting myself experience what rage felt like in a body that felt alive. He was murmuring something about a family story around disenfranchisement – I could not hear him – something about anger potentially being a transformational life force. He was acknowledging that I was, indeed, the only member who had acted.

The following morning it was the lead story on the news: one of the largest car bombs ever found in Northern Ireland, defused near J's office. We had got away with it again.

For many months I walked down that long, hard, stony road in therapy, making conscious connections with my own family story, letting myself say the un-sayable, and feeling my own anger and frustration. But looking back on that night in the group, as I write now, what strikes me most is how much I wanted to live. ■

This is an extract from *To Call Myself Beloved* by Eina McHugh, published by New Island Books 2012. An account of a therapy told from the patient's perspective, *To Call Myself Beloved* offers a fascinating window into the complex intimacy and power of the therapeutic experience, as well as a thought-provoking insight into the trauma of the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland. You can read Julia Greer's review of the book on page 31.

Eina McHugh is Director of The Ark, a cultural centre for children in Dublin. She is one of Ireland's 2012-2013 Fullbright Scholars. Originally from Northern Ireland, she now lives in Dublin. *To Call Myself Beloved* is her first book.



Reader offer

To Call Myself Beloved is available to members of BACP Private Practice at the special discounted price of £9.99 with free postage to the UK and Ireland (RRP £11.99). To order a copy tel. +353 1 298 6867

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