

Expecting the Future

A community play by

Michael Hall

with introduction by Dr. Ian Adamson

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Introduction

I first saw a performance of *Expecting the Future* six years ago in a community centre in West Belfast. My mother had been inveigled to act as one of the five pregnant women, a role she accepted with much amusement, considering that her age then was 67. The other members of the cast were teenagers, likewise unaccustomed to public acting, yet the resulting performance was memorable, not just for the talent the young people displayed but for the genuine feeling they were able to convey through their acting.

The play's author was then with the NSPCC, and among other things he and I had in common was that in our daily work – he as a social worker and I as a community paediatrician – we often had to confront a frequently ignored legacy of Northern Ireland's 'troubles' – the pain and bereavement inflicted upon so many families in our divided community.

Although the play, written in 1983, has seen a handful of public performances – in places as diverse as Belfast, Larne, Cork, and Tucson, Arizona – the author insists it wasn't written with public performance in mind, but as a reading script for young people, its main purpose being to stimulate discussion on the emotional effects of our present violence upon individuals and families. The idea had originated from one such community discussion he had initiated, during which a young participant had turned to her friend and retorted: 'How would you know? It's all right for you to talk, you don't know what it *feels* like!' The author decided to describe a little of what it 'feels like' through the medium of drama.

As a community we are ever ready to expound our political stances and drive home our opinions, even spout highly questionable justifications for some of the violence, yet – except for those directly connected to each new victim – we usually have little to say about the terrible mental anguish this violence leaves in its wake, and, probably as a defence mechanism, we avoid internalising the full horror of it all.

The play has been used as a reading script by numerous youth and community groups, and the author says that what has impressed him most has been the ability of young people in both communities to readily identify with *any* of the play's characters. Young girls reading it in Springhill Community House, Ballymurphy, could identify without hesitation with the grief expressed by the policeman's widow, just as teenagers from a nearby Shankill community project could relate

to the feelings expressed by the IRA volunteer's wife. By concentrating solely on the pain experienced by ordinary people rather than attempt to present a political 'debate', the play managed to transcend political differences and touch that sense of compassion which was gratifyingly common to all the young performers.

Ironically, it was only adults not directly involved with an actual performance who expressed hesitations. One remarked to the author that the background to the characters was too 'sketchy': could we not be told more about Anna's husband, he asked. To which the author had replied:

"Each time a killing occurs, people often seem to want to know more about the victim before they accord sympathy, a sympathy frequently determined by community loyalties. If it isn't clear from the start that the victim was a completely innocent bystander, the questioning begins – was the victim a member of the IRA, a member of the security forces, a Loyalist paramilitary, did they fall within someone's warped sense of 'legitimate target'... ? This questioning is often a way of distancing ourselves from the horror of the death, and if we do find some reason to lessen our sympathy, it unfortunately transfers itself onto the victim's family. But why should anything we learn about the deceased affect the sympathy due to the bereaved? In the play I don't say whether Anna's husband had a reputation for being caring or uncaring, whether he was liked or disliked by people in either community. Why should I reveal anything that would simply detract from Anna's grief? No – the audience are given no such clues, they are simply confronted with the stark reality of the pain felt by those left to mourn. And if we as a community cannot empathise *unconditionally* with all those who are suffering in our midst, then it will be a long time before we begin to find a way out of our present tragedy."

When I heard recently that the author was still making photocopies of the play at the behest of community groups, I suggested he publish it as one of this pamphlet series. He was reluctant to do so, partly because he was its author, and partly because, from a literary point of view, he considered it had too many defects. Nevertheless, I pressed the point – his other publications were concerned with exploring the hidden history of the Ulster people, and as this play also dealt with an often unexplored aspect of our communal tragedy, it bore its own relevance to our troubled times.

Ian Adamson

Characters:

Five expectant women:

Betty, Mary, Sally, Lily and Anna

Setting:

The TV lounge adjoining a prenatal hospital ward

Scene 1

[Two women, BETTY and MARY, are on stage. BETTY is seated, reading a magazine. MARY, uncomfortably stooping, is trying to get the TV to function.]

MARY *[thumping the TV]*: Come back out, damn it! Come on – show yer faces – I know you’re in there! *[Another thump.]*

BETTY: For Christsakes, Mary, you’ll bust the friggin’ thing! Be careful!

MARY *[giving the TV another thump and a shake]*: If I didn’t want to hurt meself, I’d lift me friggin’ foot to it! *[Her annoyance increases.]* Damn it! There’s me thinkin’ to meself I’d get seein’ all me programmes in peace, and the blasted thing . . . oh, I give up!

[SALLY has entered quietly and now sits down in an armchair. MARY backs away from the TV and goes to sit in the same armchair before discovering it is now occupied.]

MARY: Oops! Sorry, love. Wouldn’t do now if I squashed you? Don’t want an induced labour, do we? *[Laughs.]*

SALLY *[starting to rise]*: Sorry, I didn’t realise it was your seat.

MARY: Don’t be silly! Sit yerself there! They haven’t got round to puttin’ numbers on the chairs yet.

SALLY: Well, I just . . .

MARY: You just sit there. *[Plonks herself down on another armchair.]* Phew! Fightin’ that bleedin’ TV fair took it out of me.

SALLY *[quietly]*: Broken then?

BETTY *[laughing]*: Well, if it wasn’t, it is now.

MARY: Well, damn it, here’s me away from all the bloody housework, no kids pestering me . . . all the time in the world to watch me favourite programmes . . . ah!

BETTY *[distantly]*: I wish I was home now. This waitin’ is an awful drag. I wish it was over. I’m wondering what mess his lordship has got the house into.

MARY: Forget about 'im! Let him bloody well see what we women have to put up with!

BETTY: Ah, I know, but still . . . I wish it was over. Stupid, I suppose – it'll come soon enough and then I'll probably miss all these wee moments of rest.

MARY: Isn't this your fourth, Betty?

BETTY: Aye. Aye, indeed. I said I'd stop at three, but you know how it is . . .

MARY: Don't I just! [*She turns to SALLY.*] What about yerself, ah . . .?

SALLY: Sally. No . . . this is . . . [*self-consciously*] this is my first.

[*BETTY and MARY look sympathetically at SALLY.*]

MARY: Well, you're in the best bloody place, love, so don't you be worryin' yerself. Well, it would be the best bloody place, if they didn't wake you up so bleedin' early in the morning!

BETTY: I don't like hospitals at all, Mary. They smell so . . . Oh, I just wish I was getting out. Course, maybe it's the doctors you like? Eh, Sally, that's probably what she's after?

[*SALLY smiles shyly.*]

MARY: Well now, since you mention it, yon young thing this morning . . . walking along in tow behind the big cheese. Now, *he* was a bit of alright. I don't think he was paying attention to what the big noise was gibberin' on about – he was too busy takin' a good gander around. [*Then, looking at BETTY mischievously:*] Took a good look at you, he did.

BETTY: Ah, come off it! Me? And me like this? [*She pats her stomach.*]

MARY: Sure. Aren't some men supposed to find a pregnant woman sexy?

BETTY: Well not accordin' to my oul' man! Mary, does *your* man think that?
[*For the first time MARY's ebullient manner fades and she looks disturbed. BETTY stares at her for a moment, surprised, but decides to ignore it.*]

BETTY: What about yon foreign doctor? Looks quite 'distinguished', doesn't he? Would you have fancied taking *him* home in your courtin' days?

MARY [*snapping out of her mood*]: Jesus, I can just picture the faces on me ma and da! They near went bananas the time I brought home a Prod – they'd have thrown a fit if I'd waltzed in with yon.

BETTY: Still, I think he's quite good-looking. He looks quite sexy with that moustache. You not think so?

MARY: Look, I can't even make out one bloody word he says. He could be tellin' me I'm expectin' quads for all I know. I just nod at 'im.

BETTY [*laughing*]: I know, I do the same meself. But sure *he* probably can't make out one bloody word *we* say.

MARY: I don't know what foreign doctors wanna come to a place like Belfast for.

BETTY: Nor do I. Beats me. I'd love to get out of it all. Go to another country. Wouldn't it be lovely – just lovely.

[All three fall silent for a moment in reflection.]

BETTY: Mary, if you had the choice, where would you like to go?

MARY: Oh, I dunno. I've got relations in England, and down in Cork.

BETTY: Nah, I'd keep clear of relatives. [*Then, hurriedly:*] Not, mind you, that I have anything against them. Just . . . well, I'd like to make a clean break. You know what I mean? Just me and Danny and the kids. To be honest, he's always at odds with the in-laws anyway, and even his own lot. [*Sighs.*] No, I'd love to escape Belfast. Them flats is no place to rear kids. Would you not like to get away, Mary, just you and your man?

[MARY's face suddenly looks troubled. When she speaks her voice is distant and subdued.]

MARY: I'd go anywhere with Sean . . . anywhere . . . together. I'd go tomorrow if . . . [*Her lip trembles. Then, as if to divert attention, she brings Sally into the conversation.*] Well, Sally, I suppose you're up to 'high-doh'? Bet you've heard enough horror stories to make you wish you weren't pregnant at all?

SALLY: 'Horror stories'?

MARY: You know, the usual. All your friends saying "I mind hear tell of the woman who had to have . . ." before it dawns on them – "Sorry, Sally, don't mean to frighten you." Then, the very next minute . . . "Did you hear of yer woman round the corner whose doctor made a mistake . . ." That type of thing, you know?

SALLY [*smiling*]: I do. You're right, I've heard plenty to scare me, but I guess I've been too nervous most of the time, I don't really take in what's said.

BETTY: Just as well. And no doubt there's a horde of relations and neighbours just waitin' to pounce the minute you and the ba set foot inside the door, all gonna tell you the *right* way to do everything. But, if you want my opinion, you just ignore them!

MARY: Sure anyway, your Health Visitor will soon put you right. [*Sarcastically:*] No matter what bloody way *you* feel like doin' it, she'll tell you the *correct*

way! Mine bloody well took the friggin' nappy out of me hands and said, "No, not that way, dear, I'll show you how to fold it." The bloody cheek!

BETTY: You just do it all as it comes to you, Sally. Every woman knows best about herself.

[Just then LILY half enters. She is talking back over her shoulder.]

LILY: Come on! Come on in, Anna. They won't bite.

BETTY: Don't bet on it, Lily; you wanna seen Mary havin' a go at the box a minute ago.

LILY: Come on.

[ANNA enters at rear. Instead of looking timid – as her hesitation might have indicated – we see on her face just a distance look, with no sparkle to her countenance.]

LILY: Anna, this is Betty, and Mary, and . . .

MARY: That's Sally. Sit down, the pair of youse. 'Afraid the TV's had it . . .

[ANNA and LILY sit down.]

LILY: Looking round at us lot, I can see we've all had it.

BETTY: Now, now, keep it clean.

MARY: But if you're here for entertainment, I'm sure Betty will give us a rendering?

BETTY: Bloody sure I won't!

MARY: But I heard you humming something this morning?

BETTY: That doesn't mean I can sing. I was just . . . well, I read in a magazine that music can soothe the baby . . . somehow gets into your stomach . . . affects the child.

LILY: Never heard tell of that. If it's true then mine's gonna come out like something crazy! For you wanna hear the music my ones blare. All bloody day long! Near drives me round the twist!

[Unlike SALLY, who seems 'all ears', ANNA hasn't really been following the conversation. She had picked up a magazine but seems unable even to open it, and just stares into space. MARY grimaces over at BETTY, indicating ANNA's seeming aloofness, and touches her finger to her nose as if to indicate she is a 'stuck-up snob', but BETTY just shrugs her shoulders.]

LILY: Well, what's the crack? Did I miss anything? Suppose youse were on about men?

BETTY: Oh, aye, about how we miss them an' all. Like bloody Hell!

LILY: Mine's out getting plastered. Told me he'd celebrate in advance. Shouldn't have asked my sister over to look after the kids. No-one'll see him now 'till the ba's born.

BETTY: What about your husband, Sally? Come on, you're sitting there all quiet like.

SALLY [*shyly*]: Well, he's . . . he's quite good really. He's . . . he's going to come up and be with me when the baby's being born.

[This silences all the others momentarily.]

LILY: Well, I think it's only right that the man is there to watch the ba arrive – menfolk get it all too easy, it might let them see what we women have to go through!

BETTY: Mary, would *your* husband come up to see the birth?

[MARY looks disconcerted; indeed, she has been so since the conversation went on to this topic. She looks flustered and rises.]

LILY: You okay?

[MARY begins to walk off-stage.]

BETTY: Did I say anything wrong? Mary, tell me if I did!

[MARY turns around, almost in tears.]

MARY: Sean . . . Sean was arrested a few weeks ago . . . charged with murder and IRA membership . . . [*She falters, but recovers.*] He could get twenty years . . . [*She looks down at her stomach, over which she runs her hands slowly.*] Twenty years . . .

[MARY exits stage. All the others, including ANNA, stare after her.]

[Lights fade.]

Scene 2

[*Lights go on again. SALLY and LILY are sitting in their armchairs.*]

SALLY: I just hope I'm alright. I haven't been that well the whole way through.

LILY: You'll be fine. Just don't you start fretting; there's no point in worrying yourself. Everyone's nervous in some way, but moreso with the first.

SALLY: I suppose so.

LILY: Thought of any names yet?

SALLY: No, not really.

LILY: Calling it after anyone? The family, like?

SALLY: No. No . . . we wanted to avoid . . . Well, I mean, we want the child to be . . . to be different . . . [*She falters, obviously unable to articulate what she wants to say.*]

[*LILY looks quizzically at Sally. She is just about to respond when MARY enters, looking rather pained.*]

MARY: Oh, Sweet Jesus, a seat, a seat! 'My kingdom for a seat' – isn't that what yer man's supposed to have said? [*She lowers herself down, with a half-pained, half-relieved, sigh.*] Awh, dear . . . that's better!

LILY: And what's got yerself in such a tizzy? You been chasing them young doctors again?

MARY: Chasin'? Christakes, I'm tryin' to *avoid* them! With all the fingers that've been poked over my stomach, I feel like I've been trodden on by a herd of bleedin' elephants!

LILY: Were you examined *again*?

MARY [*dismissing the topic with a wave of her hand*]: Ah, no matter.

LILY: But what . . . ?

MARY: Leave it. You only let things last twice as long when you talk about them afterwards.

LILY [*looking offended*]: Well, if that's . . .

MARY [*laughing*]: Oh, look at her! Such a face! Come on, Lily, don't be so put-out. And where's Betty and 'stuck-up' Anna?

LILY: Now, that's not fair.

MARY: Oh, alright. What about yerself, Sally; all going well?

SALLY: I hope so . . .

LILY: She's been having pains. A bit worried.

MARY: Never you mind. It'll be over before you know it. You just wait 'till you have three or four traipsin' round your feet, then you'll wish you'd become a nun.

[*LILY shakes her head at MARY and raises her eyes to SALLY. BETTY enters.*]

MARY: Here she is now. I thought I saw you headin' this way in front of me?

BETTY: I was, but I stopped to look in at Anna.

LILY: Youse chatting?

BETTY [*distantly*]: Not really . . .

MARY: Not friggin' likely either! The likes of us aren't good enough for her.

LILY: Mary, that's unfair!

MARY: Unfair? I tried to chat yesterday, and the looks I got weren't ordinary. 'Cold' isn't the word!

LILY: Well . . .

MARY: Well, nothing!

BETTY: She was crying solid. There's something the matter.

[*All four look subdued at this information.*]

LILY: See, Mary, I told you not to be so pass-remarkable. You never know. . .

MARY: Okay, okay, maybe you're right. Don't get yer knickers in a twist.

LILY: *Who's* gettin' . . .

BETTY [*irritatedly*]: Knock it off, you two! [*Then, trying to deflate the situation:*] Just think . . . if my knickers had been in a twist I mightn't have ended up being in here. The delay might've cooled his passion.

[*The others stare in surprise, then burst out laughing. Suddenly SALLY gives an involuntary gasp and clutches the sides of her armchair tightly.*]

MARY *quickly goes over to her, but even though SALLY's eyes are closed and her face still registers pain, she indicates with her hand that she is all right. She finally relaxes and breathes deeply.*]

LILY: Want us to call for someone?

SALLY [*somewhat breathless*]: No . . . there's no need . . . it's passed.

MARY: Wasn't a contraction?

SALLY: No. Just a strange pain. But I'm fine . . . I'm fine now.

[The other three women exchange worried glances.]

BETTY: Are the doctors aware of this?

SALLY: Yes. I tell you . . . I'm okay again.

[It is obvious SALLY doesn't wish to pursue the matter and without her noticing, LILY indicates to BETTY to cease any further questioning.]

LILY: [*endeavouring to sound light-hearted*]: Anyway, Sally, look at it this way – the trouble they can make before they come into the world is nothing compared to what they make once they've arrived.

BETTY: You're not joking there!

[ANNA enters, subdued looking. She sits down. There is a brief silence.]

LILY: [*obviously stuck for something to say*]: Ah . . . the ward's quiet, is it?

ANNA: [*for a moment not realising that it was she who was being addressed*]: Sorry? Oh yes, it's quite quiet.

LILY: Hope Doctor Murray doesn't wander in.

MARY: Why?

LILY: You not hear him yesterday!

BETTY: *I* did; God, he was wild!

MARY [*impatiently*]: What did he say?

LILY: Comes strolling in, shouting [*mimicing his voice*]: "All these women were brought in early for high blood-pressure or possible complications, and *not one* of them in their beds! It's not a bloody holiday-camp, you know!"

MARY: Who was he shouting at? The Staff Sister?

BETTY: At everyone and no-one. Didn't stop long enough to see *who* was there. In and out like a shot.

LILY: Sounds like my oul' man.

MARY: Lily!

BETTY: Did Sister Blair say anything to you afterwards, Lily – I saw you talking to her.

LILY: Oh, I don't think she pays too much attention to him. Anyway, I bribed her.

MARY: You what?

LILY: I said I would write a wee poem for the staff dance that's coming up.

SALLY: A poem? Can you . . . did you write one?

LILY [*evasively*]: Aye . . . well, a sort of one.

MARY: Well, let's hear it then.

SALLY [*quietly*]: Yes, I'd like to hear it.

LILY: Well . . .

BETTY: Come on – out with it!

[LILY *fidgets in her pocket and retrieves a folded piece of paper.*]

LILY [*anxiously*]: It's not very good . . .

MARY: Get on with it.

LILY: Well, okay. It's . . . it's called 'The Hospital Ball'*:

In the Hospital it was planned
To hire the biggest, loudest band;
Something that would thrill them all
At the doctors' and nurses' Hospital Ball.

The nurses waited with hopes so high
And each one knew the reason why;
The ball itself was nothing new
The question was – "Who's taking who?"

Then some bright spark suggested a dare
To all the nurses and doctors there;
Why not ballot the nurses and take a chance
On the perfect partner for the Hospital dance?

So into a hat the nurses' names they threw
Then each doctor a partner drew;
Some were glad and some were not
But each was stuck with their chosen lot.

On the night of the dance they dressed with care

* With thanks to Susan Graham, who – as in the play – wrote this poem while in a maternity ward.

Even the Matron she tinted her hair;
Off they went, gliding up the stairs,
Doctors and nurses, all in pairs.

By eight o'clock it had all begun,
With everyone determined to have some fun.
Except Doctor Moore, he was feeling low,
He tried hard not to let it show.
For the nurse he took to the Hospital Ball
Topped him by inches, she was so tall;
But all in all he came of best,
For he danced all night with his nose in her chest.

Doctor Brown was feeling randy,
So he brought along a bottle of brandy;
The nurse he drew was prim and proper,
But after a few she came a cropper;
She let her hair and her inhibitions unfurl,
As they waltzed around in a drunken swirl.

Now Doctor Jones he got quite tipsy
He fancied himself as a romantic gipsy;
His partner thought he had such charm
But she got a shock when he chanced his arm;
His hands were roaming quite out of place
But he soon stopped when she slapped his face.

By two o'clock things slowed down
There weren't so many people around;
Some were drunk and some were sober
Others couldn't wait 'till the dance was over.
But I'm quite sure that one and all
Enjoyed themselves at the Hospital Ball.

*[The other women, excepting ANNA, applaud and express their approval.
MARY glances briefly over at ANNA, but then looks away.]*

MARY: I like it, I like it.

LILY [*embarrassedly*]: Oh, it's only a silly poem.

BETTY: But you can just picture them all waltzing around, getting more and more sloshed. [*Then, in a deliberately suggestive voice:*] Rubbing against each other . . .

MARY: Hey you – don't be getting worked-up now!

BETTY: Jesus, I've just thought of something!

MARY: What?

BETTY: What if one of us ever had to be operated on the morning after?

SALLY: After what?

BETTY: After a dance, like. They could still be sloshed. God knows what could happen. We wouldn't know – we might be out cold.

LILY: Could be worse. Not only drunk, but they could still be randy . . .
[*Pretending to be serious:*] Just picture it, Betty . . . you lying there all asleep, stretched out in all your 'glory', and a randy doctor sways into the theatre.

[BETTY throws a magazine at LILY.]

BETTY: Shut you up!

SALLY: Will you write a poem for us, with us in it?

LILY: Well, I don't know now . . .

[ANNA rises while LILY is talking, and somewhat lethargically moves towards the rear of the stage. MARY watches her.]

MARY: Your poems don't suit everyone, it seems. Isn't that so, Anna?

[*It looks as if ANNA mightn't have heard this, then she turns to look at MARY.*]

ANNA: Sorry?

MARY: Not fancy Lily's poetry, then?

ANNA [*distantly*]: I'm sorry, I wasn't really listening . . .

[*Despite BETTY's indication for her to desist, MARY seems annoyed and continues.*]

MARY: I mean, you hardly say one word to any of us. Like, we're all in the same boat, you know, aren't we? But you act as if you can't wait to get away from us, and back to your wee hubby.

ANNA [*staring at MARY, not malevolently, but almost resignedly*]: My husband's not long buried. He was a policeman. The IRA shot him in the back of the head.

[ANNA continues to stare at MARY for a moment, then resumes her exit from the stage.]

[*Lights fade.*]

Scene 3

[Lights go on again. ANNA is sitting in an armchair – she is alone. For some moments she stares vacantly in front of her. Then BETTY comes in. ANNA looks up but doesn't speak.]

BETTY: Hi.

[BETTY sits down. There is an awkward silence.]

BETTY: Oh, dear, I can feel it won't be long now. What about you?

ANNA: *[listlessly]*: Probably.

BETTY: What were you brought in early for? Blood pressure? Or . . . *[She falters.]*

ANNA: I'm not sure why. My doctor just said he was 'worried'. Didn't really say why.

[Another brief silence.]

BETTY: Don't mind Mary, Anna. I mean . . . she's okay really. She thought you were . . . well, you know, ignoring us. She didn't realise . . .

ANNA: No, I suppose not.

BETTY: You got kids at home?

ANNA: Two – two girls.

BETTY: Did . . . did they take it bad?

ANNA: Very, especially the oldest. She was very attached to her father. He was extremely proud of her, she was doing so well at school. *[Dreamily:]* They were so close. You know, I used to joke with him: "What'll you say when she starts bringing boys home? I think you're going to be jealous." But he'd just smile and say, "When that day is due to arrive, then it *will* arrive. Until then we should just take each day as it comes." *[Sadly:]* You would almost think he knew, wouldn't you? There was one thing he always said – I'll never forget it: "Each day of our children's lives can never come back again. If we miss it while it's happening, then we've lost it." *[She pauses.]* And now . . . now she . . . she just . . . *[For the first time ANNA's defences fail her and she seems unable to prevent her emotions coming to*

the surface.] She just . . . locks herself away in her room. I . . . I can hear her crying. Calling out for her “Daddy”. “Daddy,” she cries . . . “Daddy!” [Her face goes taught, and she bites at her lip.] It’s . . . it’s breaking my heart . . . because I know how it’s breaking her’s! [ANNA’s head falls into her hands, and she begins to sob.]

[BETTY is alarmed at this sudden outpouring of emotion, and for a moment is uncertain how to act. She goes over beside ANNA, kneels down and puts an arm around her shoulders.]

BETTY: I’m sorry, Anna, I shouldn’t have brought it up.

ANNA [*tearfully*]: But why not! Everybody avoids it! I meet people in the street, in the shops, even friends – *no-one* mentions him now, you’d think he never existed! [*Calming slightly.*] I can sense their heads turn after I pass, I know they’re talking about him – but why can’t they talk about him to *me*! It’s me and the children who miss him the most! [*Angrily:*] Do they think we’ve just forgotten him! Do they think we don’t care!

BETTY: [*alarmed*]: There, there, Anna, take it easy. They probably just don’t want to upset you.

ANNA: But they *do* upset me! They . . . [*Then, as if her energy has drained:*] You’re right, Betty, you’re right. I’d probably have acted the same.

[Short silence. BETTY doesn’t know whether it is best to continue the conversation, or to avoid it, but ANNA looks as if she is set to talk on, regardless.]

ANNA: I keep getting images. Pictures. Every night they haunt me. I can feel them coming in my sleep, and I break out in a cold sweat. I want to run into the girls’ room in case they’re lying there terrified too, but I can’t . . . their anguish and their fear would be too much for me . . . I feel stuck to the bed.

[Brief silence.]

BETTY: ‘Images’?

ANNA: Of Billy. [*Her eyes close and she looks as if she is going to cry again, but she recovers.*] His face. When they let me see him . . . they weren’t going to, but I insisted. His face . . . it wasn’t really there. [*BETTY looks startled.*] It haunts me . . . the holes . . . the mess. But I had to see him, I felt I owed it to him . . . to us both . . . after all we’d come through together. And I had to say a last good-bye. [*She stares distantly in front.*] Funny, he had a bit of a headache when he left that evening. I’d no Disprin in the house – he was a bit annoyed at that, I remember. Said he’d get some in a shop while he was on duty. They . . . they found a packet clutched tightly in his hand when he was rushed to hospital. [*ANNA notices that BETTY*

is staring warily at her.] You think I'm crazy? I'm not, at least I hope not. You . . . you just . . . remember these things. Big things. Little things. When he was being lowered into the grave, Laura – she's the youngest – pushed through all the mourners and shouted: "Daddy, get up! See all the flowers everyone has brought you!" *[ANNA bursts into tears again and BETTY and she cling to each other.]* Bastards! Why him! Why did he have to die! Why can't we have him back!

[The sobbing continues for a while then the two women separate. ANNA searches for a tissue and dries her eyes.]

ANNA: Betty, you'd be better in a chair, you can't be comfortable kneeling there. *[Then, trying to smile:]* Doctor Murray'll be shouting at us if he sees you down there.

BETTY: Ah, forget about him. He'll not shout at me!

ANNA *[firmly]*: No, please, sit up. I'll be okay. Honest.

[BETTY reluctantly stands up and goes back to her armchair. Both women sit subdued for some moments.]

BETTY *[warily]*: Do you want to talk any more?

ANNA *[sighing]*: Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. Right now I suppose I don't mind. But . . . *[Falters.]*

BETTY *[encouragingly]*: Yes?

ANNA: It's just that 'talking' . . . 'words' . . . it all seems so distant. The doctor did try to talk to me, and Billy's seniors, and of course my relations . . . but I seemed to hear them all as if in a dream.

BETTY: You were still in shock.

ANNA: No – I mean yes, I was then – but no, it's just that putting it all into words is impossible. I suppose that's why people avoid it. But it's more than not knowing the right words to say. It's just that . . . *[She suddenly stares at BETTY.]* There *are* no words, it has *nothing* to do with words.

[BETTY looks uncertain as to what to say, and remains silent.]

ANNA: I could try and describe what it's like?

BETTY *[apprehensively]*: Well, look Anna, if you'd prefer not to dwell . . .

ANNA *[sighing]*: Whether I dwell on his death or not doesn't seem to be within my control. Sometimes I don't know if it's *his* death that upsets me the most, or *our* loss. Can you see the difference? Does that sound selfish?

BETTY: No, of course not.

ANNA: You know, I can *only* tell you now what it's like, because *at this moment* I'm not feeling it in its intensity; I just feel numb again. [*She pauses.*] And yet those feelings are always there . . . just below the surface of my thoughts, waiting. I'll be pottering about the house . . . my mind won't be on anything in particular, and then . . . maybe the words of a song on the radio, or even for no real reason at all . . . something will spark it off again and this terrible sensation comes over me. It gathers around me like a fog . . . I can't prevent it coming; there's no way to escape it. You feel a horrible . . . a horrible 'draining' . . . as if everything in your body and mind is draining inwards. Your limbs become totally weak, you feel like jelly, ready to collapse. And then. . . then the panic comes. [*A look of fear passes over her face.*]

BETTY: It's okay, Anna; it's okay.

ANNA: Your body seems like a blanket wrapped too tightly around you, suffocating you. And everything around you seems to be closing in on you as well, and you run from the house into the backyard, trying to suck in enough air to drown your growing panic. . . but it's all in vain, your whole being seems to be caught in its suffocating grip. [*ANNA is gripping the armchair tightly, her knuckles white, her face strained.*] Then the tears come, choking tears mingled with your lost cries . . . crying out for him, for yourself, for the children, and at *all* grief, *everyone's* grief . . . Bitterness and helplessness . . . anger and pleading . . . Then something else creeps up on you. . . an awareness that all this grief *cannot* change what had happened – *nothing* can be reversed . . . and worse, that you are doomed to a future of such remembrances. It's the fact that you can feel the grief reach out for you *beyond today*, into your very future, that causes the worse feelings of dread. You scream to yourself: how will I ever survive it! Oh, my God! [*ANNA almost falls off the armchair, as she collapses forwards. BETTY quickly gets to her side and supports her.*] Oh, my God! [*ANNA's voice is almost hoarse now, heart-rending in its anguish.*] What'll I tell the child! Sometimes I feel I want it – it might be a boy, and Billy would've loved a son. But other times . . . I just wish it wasn't there. How can I watch it growing up, knowing someday I'm going to be asked: "Where's my daddy?" [*In a panic now.*] What'll I say! What'll I say! [*Then, almost screaming:*] Suppose someone else tells the child: "The IRA blew your daddy's head away!" Oh, my God . . . could I not even have had just one more day with him! Just one more hour! Why did it have to happen to us! [*She now loses her anguished intensity, and begins to ramble in her thoughts. BETTY watches her, her anxiety increasing.*] You know, if I hadn't been busy watching that silly film before he left the house, we could have had all that time to talk. I

could have held him close, I could have . . . The blood was a terrible mess . . . his hair was matted together . . . like spikes [BETTY *gets up and goes quickly to rear of the stage.*] . . . It was red, but not really red . . .

BETTY [*to someone off-stage*]: Could you get a nurse, quickly!

[BETTY *returns to ANNA.*]

ANNA: . . . dark red . . . like . . . what'll I say to the child, what'll I say! What if the child finds out before I'm ready to explain everything . . .

[BETTY *endeavours to get ANNA to stand. ANNA looks up at BETTY, as if in a daze, but allows BETTY to help her to her feet. They walk to the rear of the stage.*]

ANNA: What'll I say . . . what'll I say . . .

[*The two women exit.*]

[*Lights fade.*]

Scene 4

[*When lights go up, BETTY, LILY, SALLY and MARY are sitting in their armchairs. SALLY seems pained; the others are looking at her concernedly.*]

LILY: You don't look well at all, Sally.

SALLY [*with a detectable strain in her voice*]: I feel so funny inside.

BETTY [*trying to joke*]: Not half as funny as you look outside.

MARY [*reproachingly*]: Be serious, Betty.

BETTY: Sorry, Sally, I didn't mean to . . .

SALLY: It's okay, Betty . . . it's my fault too, I can't relax, I've too much on my mind.

BETTY: Well, don't tell Lily what's on your mind or it'll end up in one of her poems.

SALLY [*trying to cheer up*]: Indeed, I'll have to be careful.

MARY: We're all far too bloody serious at the moment. Let's see . . . let's . . . ah . . .

LILY: What you are scheming now?

MARY: Let's help Sally pick a name for the ba. [To SALLY:] You still not decided on a name yet?

SALLY [*quietly*]: No.

BETTY [*to MARY*]: Have *you*?

MARY: Yes. [*Then, mischievously*:] If mine's a boy, he'll be called . . . Cuthbert.

BETTY & LILY: Cuthbert!

BETTY: Jesus, I can just see you shoutin' all over the Lower Falls: "Cuthbert, come in and stop throwing stones at the Army!" [*She mimics an 'upper-class' voice*:] "Come in I say, Cuthbert! This minute!"

SALLY [*with a depressed tone*]: You don't think it'll still all be going on when they grow up . . .

[*Everyone seems sobered by this thought, but LILY tries to prevent the mood changing.*]

LILY [*quickly*]: Enough, what about a name, then?

BETTY: What would your relations like, Sally?

SALLY [*shaking her head sadly*]: Maybe this is the wrong subject too.

MARY [*puzzled*]: Why?

SALLY: My relations are one of my biggest problems. [*The others look at her quizzically.*] You see . . . I'm . . . we're a mixed marriage. [*Then, sadly*:] We had so much trouble getting married, you wouldn't believe the half of it.

BETTY: Both sides expecting you to bring it up as . . .?

SALLY [*interrupting with a forcefulness that surprises everyone, even herself*]: It's going to have nothing to do with either side! [*Then, a little embarrassed at her outburst*:] I mean . . . I'm sick of what both sides are doing to each other. [*Firmly*:] I want our child to be 'different'. I want it to . . . see beyond all this mess. [*Almost in tears now.*] 'Cause it makes me so sad. All the killing . . . I get so . . .

[*Suddenly SALLY gives a sharp cry of pain and doubles over. As quickly as they can, MARY and LILY get to her side. They immediately lift her up and begin supporting her to the rear of the stage.*]

MARY [*to off-stage*]: Nurse! Quickly!

[All three exit the stage, but MARY soon reappears.]

MARY [to off-stage:] You going to stay with her, Lily?

[MARY sits down. Both she and BETTY look glum.]

BETTY: Poor Sally. God, I hope she'll be alright.

[MARY doesn't answer. There is silence for a moment.]

BETTY: You know, no matter how much we may laugh and joke, everybody's got problems of their own. I used to look at people and say, 'She's landed on her feet alright,' or 'That one is sittin' pretty: she doesn't have *my* worries.' But not now. I've seen too much happening all around me. I walk down the street now looking at passers-by, and say to myself: every *one* of these people is hiding some sadness. [Almost talking to herself.] Sometimes you can see it in their faces, sometimes you can't. But even behind the happiest-looking face, I know some anxiety or upset must hide. [She pauses and stares at MARY who is looking pensive.] Take poor Anna. [Both women's eyes meet.] I mean, once you get to know her she's okay really. It's a pity you and she didn't hit it off in the . . .

MARY [interrupting, speaking firmly]: Look, Betty, I was wrong. Okay, I misjudged her. I thought she was just a stuck-up bitch. I was wrong, I admit it.

BETTY: But you still avoid her? I suppose just because she's a . . .

MARY: No, Betty, now *you're* wrong. Oh, I know what you were going to say. Her husband in the police, and mine in the IRA. [Musing.] It's funny, isn't it, but those facts should have us . . . have us at each other's throats – isn't that what people would expect? And yet . . . yet the truth is . . . it's not like that at all. God, how absurd! People like my husband killed her husband; people like her husband were out to kill my husband. [Shakes her head, and speaks in a tormented voice:] Jesus, this bloody country! [Then, calmer:] No – the truth is different. Under it all, what really matters is that she's a mother, and I'm a mother. Her children will face life with no father, so will mine – I mean, by the time Sean gets out, they could all be up and away. [She looks extremely sad.]

BETTY: But why can't you talk to her then?

MARY: Why? I'll tell you why. Because I'm afraid. [BETTY looks at her quizzically.] Yes – afraid. Look – we're all in here to give *birth*! But what's lingering at the back of our minds? It's *death*! Anna's lost a husband. I feel bereaved. And God knows, we're all dreading hearing anything about Sally. Go on, admit it, I can friggin' sense it! Every time she has a pain I feel it's *me* that's suffering it. And we can't say anything to her except,

“Don’t worry, it’ll be alright.” Christ, we don’t even friggin’ believe it ourselves! [*She sighs deeply.*] Maybe I’m imagining things. Or maybe it’s just this damn country! This stupid, bloody country would get anyone down. [*MARY begins to cry, but tries not to show it, endeavouring to wipe the tears away surreptitiously. BETTY pretends not to notice. After a short silence MARY resumes.*] No, I don’t talk to Anna because I’m afraid of her getting upset, and then *me* getting upset.

BETTY: It might do you both good?

MARY: Would it? Look how many thousands of people are being upset in this country, and what good’s it doing? Damn all! [*Then, apologetically:*] I’m sorry, Betty, I know you didn’t mean it that way. It’s just that . . . Well – I’m in here having another ba, and children are the most precious thing in the world to me. And yet, they’re the thing that terrifies me most. [*Then, seeing BETTY’s puzzled look, she smiles.*] Not what you’re thinking, though they *can* be real terrors. I mean . . . [*Getting serious again*] I have a real fear of anything ever happening to them. [*Musing, almost absent-mindedly:*] You know, when they’re asleep, I still creep into their rooms and listen for their breathing. Sometimes when I can’t make it out, I have to bend over them, and listen . . . holding my breath until I can detect theirs. God, the older ones would look at me funny if they knew. [*Laughs.*] I’ve been near caught on a couple of times.

BETTY: I know just what you mean. I’m not as bad as you now but I mind all the times when they were babies and I’d be upstairs every twenty minutes checking. Near drove Danny up the walls – and then I found out he did it too, any time I was out.

MARY: When they’d get upset over something really silly and unimportant – like last week when Anne lost one of her gloves on the way back from school – and they’d come in crying, I’d tell them that it didn’t matter. But as I’d be comforting them . . . as I’d brush away their tears and try to reassure them . . . I’d get this awful feeling of dread, knowing of all the deeper hurts that could lie ahead of them. Or when they were toddlers and had woken up alone in the dark, and with the TV blaring it had been some time before we’d realised . . . I’d go upstairs and the wee arms would be reaching out, the little lips trembling, panic in their eyes, and the crying – once it had stopped – replaced, for what seemed like ages, by these deep shaking sighs. I’d get so frightened that somewhere, at some time in the future, they could be in real pain or danger . . . needing me so badly . . . and I wouldn’t be there to comfort or protect them. A mental picture of them crying alone would tear into my heart. I’d even begin to *feel* their hurt, their fear . . . [*She looks directly at BETTY.*] I suppose this all sounds really stupid?

BETTY [*shaking her head negatively.*] No, not in the least.

MARY: My life is so tied in with theirs, I know I would die if anything happened to them. I fear that as if I fear my own death . . . as if it *is* the same death. I look at them and find it impossible – totally impossible – to imagine that they cannot reach *every* age – their eighth birthday, their tenth Christmas . . . Then I remember that millions of children around the world die every year before they even reach the age my ones are . . . and I know that *nothing* is promised for ever, *nothing* is for sure. [*She pauses for a moment.*] A neighbour's child used to go to school with Anne, but was killed in a road accident a year ago. Sometimes I see the neighbour staring out her window over at our house – at the same time every day, the time Anne comes skipping home from school. She just stares and stares, without moving. Sometimes I'm so busy fussing round Anne, before it dawns on me – sort of creepy like – that she's still standing there, motionless. [*Another pause.*] But . . . but sometimes the curtains are closed – this is three in the afternoon, mind you – and I feel this terrible urge to go over and comfort her. Why should I assume she needs comforted? 'Cause I know the pain I'd feel, and I know I'd have to shut it off, close out all the memories . . . [MARY *looks near tears.*] I'm silly getting in this mood. [*Tries to laugh.*] Funny, I now agree with you – I wish it was all over and I was going home. [*Then, quietly:*] Though I'm dreading how I'm going to manage . . . without Sean.

[LILY *has entered at back of stage as they talk. For a moment they don't notice her, and she makes no effort to move towards a chair, but remains there, looking 'shattered'. Eventually BETTY does notice and stares at her, before suddenly bringing her hands up to her face, as she guesses the reason for LILY's demeanour.*]

BETTY: No! No! Say No! [*She shakes her head and fights back the tears.*]

[*This sets off LILY, who bites at her bottom lip as she stumbles out her words.*]

LILY [*in anguish:*] She's lost it! She's lost it!

[*As if in a dream LILY goes towards an armchair, and sinks into it, sobbing. Her head falls into her hands. MARY goes over, kneels beside her and puts her arm round her. For a moment LILY is too upset to say anything; then finally she looks up.*]

LILY: She had such hopes for that child. Remember how funny it sounded when she said she wanted it to grow up 'different'? To be beyond all the bigotry here. A 'child for the future', she said to me afterwards . . . And the child was stillborn. [*Now shouting, half-angry, half-tearful.*] What future has this country! Has it *any*! This bloody country doesn't deserve children! There's no . . . [*Then, more subdued:*] Look at us! Except for our families, *who* gives a shit that we're in here! Politicians wouldn't look sideways at

us; nobody's gonna ask *us* onto the 'box' to give our opinions . . . and yet . . . we hold all the cards. [*The other two stare at her, perplexed.*] Can't you see! The future's here alright . . . it's being born to us in that friggin' delivery room down there! [*Then, in anguish:*] Oh, Sally, Sally!

[*LILY begins sobbing again. For some time her sobbing is the only sound. The others look devastated. Then ANNA comes slowly onto the stage. She is breathing deeply – obviously experiencing contractions – and is indicating to someone off-stage that she will 'be with them in a minute'. Finally the others realise she is there, and look up.*]

ANNA: Mine's on its way. I'm . . . I'm off now. I . . . I heard about Sally. I . . . [*Falters.*]

BETTY [*trying to sound cheerful:*] You'll be alright, Anna. Keep some places for us, won't you, in the maternity ward?

[*ANNA smiles faintly. She is standing close to where MARY is kneeling. As she turns to depart MARY gently touches her arm.*]

MARY: We'll be thinking of you, Anna.

ANNA [*quietly:*] Thanks, Mary.

[*ANNA exits the stage.*]

[*Lights fade.*]

[*Curtain.*]