Safe From Home

Lionel J Mullally

One of the tasks of a writer is to address key injustices they see around them, not just by polemic but by skillful, trenchant writing that unsettles us. This is what Lionel Mullaly does in "Safe from Home". Narrated through the eyes of s small Syrian boy who tells of his escape from a war zone and the men with Black Flags to another greener, more peaceful land, "a rich country": Ireland. The writer captures so well the tension and fear of the family's escape and the child's frantic worry about his father's survival. Yet though they have evaded danger and death, they face new challenges in the ghastly limbo we have devised for refugees known as direct provision. The child soon learns their welcome is not 100%: Racism is not inherent in children, they learn it from adults. This is a wonderful story, beautifully crafted, one that everyone buying the Guardian should read. This story tackles the foetid running sore of direct provision in such an articulate, sensitive way that it deserves an award

I HAD THOUGHT that nothing would be as bad as the vomiting.

I was wrong.

What came after was worse. The retching; the constant retching and nothing left to vomit. The white, dried sick around my mouth and inside my nostrils; the constant stale smell; and all around me, everyone the same. Everywhere I looked there was dried sick stains around lips, empty heaving and retching and silent babies with what whimpers they had left going unheeded by their cradling mothers. Eventually we stopped moving. The waves had ceased, the bolt was drawn, the door was thrown open and we were ushered to the hard shore.

"Igri, igri," they yelled, or hurry up. We were pushed and packed into vans. It was dark inside and the metal floor was cool for a while after the humid heat of the sea journey before we were taken and hurriedly driven away into the night.

The van stopped after some hours. The door was pulled open and the men grabbed our bags and, throwing them to the ground, they pulled us out and urged us on.

"That way," they gestured, "Now go away. Imshi. "

And they left us then to walk the last miles to the camp as dawn broke over Turkey.

Mama, baby Aylan and I. Father had arranged the boat. We had left my town of Idlib in western Syria soon after the men with Black Flags had arrived. They had closed our schools, covered the women, killed our neighbours. I was almost seven then and seen the Christians in nearby Hama routed or killed, their place of worship destroyed.

Father tried to shield me from it. But it was everywhere. The Black flags fluttering in their victory and the sound of gunfire constant. The foreigners with the Black Flags and guns controlled all and stopped us from leaving. They guarded the roads from town stopping us and checking us every time. Papa's school where he worked as a teacher was destroyed. His colleagues had vanished and Papa knew that we too should hide and would have to leave. We left late one night and walked in the heat across the dry ground and sand towards the coast, pulling our clothes tight and covered our faces to guard against the dust.

"Western Skies," he told me. "beneath them is our hope. They will welcome us. But you must be a man now, protect your Mama and Alyun. I will join you later, Inshallah, God Willing."

He had saved us first. He had paid much from all he had for us to go on the boat to Turkey. He would join us later.

He had promised.

Months later in the camp I still believed that. I stared west and prayed for Father. Mama was silent at times but she too would look and pray. Alyun grew and learned to walk and talk. We played with sticks and balls made from cloths sewn together. At times we raced and queued for the new clothes that arrived. I played with my friends, pretending to be Messi or Neymar like we had watched on TV at home. We sat on the ground in the small school, learned our prayers and songs, and practiced our German and English.

Father missed all.

In the camp the food was tasteless. Mama cooked what she could but the flavours of home were gone. I remembered the lamb kebabs and rice she cooked that melted to the touch while here the food was coarse, tasteless at times, but filling. Mama said she missed the chance to cook and as I watched her crouched over the fire and pots, she joked of the times she spent standing by the cooker, juggling the oven and pots on the stove, when all she had ever needed was a fire and a single pot. The blue flags had replaced the black and we were safe. We were not prisoners we were told. But we could not leave. In time, we were told, we would be moved.

Mama told us stories each night of Father. How he loved his work as a teacher, how proud he was to get an apartment for his family and provide all the food and toys we needed.

"Your Papa is a proud man," she would tell us, "proud to work and give all to his family. Not to live with his parents or by the leave of another is important to him. Being here would upset him. He'd have no work, no wages; he would feel as if he couldn't be a man and provide for us. In time we'll be back with him and he'll have all ready for us then."

Sometime later, after almost a year in the camp, smiling men arrived to tell us we were leaving and going to a new country where we would have a new home. Twenty from the camp were taken. Mama, Alyun and I boarded a bus and were driven to the airport. I carried the bag with our belongings while Mama carried Alyun as we sweated and queued in the dry heat with the others to board the aeroplane.

We landed in the cold and damp. Mama hugged Alyun tighter. I pulled my coat around me and the hat lower on my head. Around us was a city. Another bus brought us past fields of green. There was so much green; the grass, the trees and hedgerows, everywhere; more than I had ever seen. Houses surrounded us.

It was a rich country.

We queued again as we were brought to a large hall where food and drinks were given by smiling people who spoke quickly. One ruffled my hair. I had forgotten how that felt. I smoothed it back down, smiling. There were other Syrians there to meet us, other Arabs.

Mama cried out, called to God with her arms out stretched and Papa ran into them. They held each other, shaking and crying and not letting go. Papa fell to his knees and Alyun and I were drawn into his embrace and warmth.

Papa was crying. Mama was crying. I cried. Alyun kept eating some chocolate, its

dark stains around his lips, and offered us some. Papa laughed, held him tight, rocking him from left to right, ran his fingers through his hair and smoothed it down again.

"I told you," he smiled at me, "I promised you. We are together again beneath the western sky. God is good. Now they will take us to our new home. "

We boarded a bus and travelled past many more green fields for a long time. We passed through small towns, shadows of larger towns at times in the distance. The language was different but each town said 'Welcome to' as we passed through.

Soon the signs welcomed us to Ballaghaderreen. The hall was full of people and food and we were shown and told all about our new home.

They told us the times food would be given to us and showed us the rooms or small houses we would have. The men asked about work but were told that working was not permitted for now but that they would be given all they needed and €19 a week. Papa explained he was a teacher and could help. They smiled, said thank you, but no. They would give us all we needed.

"And a small rest for the ladies too," one said with a laugh, "you won't have to worry about cooking meals. We'll give all to you".

Father was quiet. Many of the men were. They looked at each other and spoke.

"But we need to work," they said, "we are men, we must. The family needs us to".

"Impossible for now," was the reply. "Perhaps in the future. But for now you must stay here with us and let us worry about you and to provide for you".

Mama held Fathers's hand and said it would be alright. But Father seemed to have shrunk a little.

"Come," he said to me after a while, taking my hand, "let's walk a little and see this new world".

"See," he continued, "God has provided. We are here, safe, no more black flags. Even the town's name, B-Allah-derreen, sounds like His name".

I smiled back up at him.

We walked through the door and looked out. He placed his arm around me and we walked to the lane and road. The air was cool, leaves in tall trees sheltered us and the sounds of this new world enveloped us.

Young boys on bicycles went by on the road below. They waved their arms and hands in the air, a finger or two extended, and shouted.

Papa held me tighter, turning me in to him.

As they sped away he looked down and smiled at me.

"They welcomed us to our new home," he said, "welcomed us to paradise."

He ruffled my hair and I smoothed it back.

I thought they had said 'go home' and 'parasite'.

Papa said God had saved us and brought us as a family back together beneath the western sky. We were lucky. We would be safe here. Papa had promised. But his smile was smaller now as he looked home to the east.

Snippet

STYLISH SILAGE

THE 'STYLISH SILAGE' competition was organised by An Tostal Committee, Drumshanbo in June/July 2017. The Competition was the brainchild of Theresa Keaney, a member of the Committee. There were 56 entries, all of which were on display around the town and parish of Drumshanbo. There was a huge response both locally and nationally. The winning exhibit was the narrow-gauge railway locomotive and coal engine entered by Mary Nugent, Sinead Dolan, Elaine Prior and Virgil Lynch on behalf of Childhood Days, Drumshanbo.