

HALFWAY HOUSE



A drama by Philip Orr
About 1916 - set in 1966

Part of the "1916 A Hundred Years On" Project by Contemporary Christianity

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About 1916 - set in 1966

***"What keeps hearts from falseness
...is that there is nowhere to hide and plenty of room for vision..."***
JOSEPH BRODSKY

***"Hope is a central Christian principle - hopefully we can learn lessons
from the past as we struggle to work for a better future"***
NOEL McCUNE
(Chairman Contemporary Christianity, January 2012)

Community Relations Council



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A note about the publisher

Contemporary Christianity is the successor to Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland (ECONI, 1988 – 2005) and the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland (2005-2010). ECONI emerged against the background of our community division and political violence in Northern Ireland, when a group of evangelical Christians argued for a new response. Their conviction was that faithful witness must take seriously the biblical command to make peace and do justice.

Contemporary Christianity exists to help Christians and churches in Northern Ireland effectively serve Christ in our changing world. Profound changes in culture have swept through Europe in recent years. In Northern Ireland we have particular issues to address and contributing to the Decade of Centenaries is one of our key themes.

HALFWAY HOUSE

A drama by Philip Orr

The scene is an ante room of a pub in the hills, long since gone, called Halfway House, on a steep pass on an exposed ridge in the Sperrin Mountains. Its neon sign was a welcome sight to many a nocturnal traveller.

It is a snowy Saturday night in February 1966.

It is eight o'clock at night or maybe just after. There are sounds of a blizzard outside but also a busy bar and the music from a juke box, playing at a low volume – 'The Sound of Silence' by Simon and Garfunkel.

Valerie sits in the ante-room. She is hunting through her capacious bag and among other things she brings out some tickets from an envelope to look at. Bronagh arrives in. She brings a drink with her and stands as close as she can to the electric fire. She also carries a vast bag full of miscellaneous bits and bobs, as female travellers do.

Both look a bit windswept and damp.

BRONAGH – It's a bit warmer in here.

VALERIE – And there's no juke box in here, thank God. The weather isn't putting off the young ones, by the sound of it.

BRONAGH – Are you in the same position as me, then? Stuck in here until the snow stops?

VALERIE – Yes, I'm here for the night.

BRONAGH - There's no way anyone should try driving over the pass in that snow.

VALERIE - You'd freeze to death if the car stopped.

BRONAGH – Thank God for a hot whiskey.

VALERIE – I must get one of those. It looks good.

BRONAGH – So we're in the Halfway House, eh? It's just here on the map, I think...I've driven past it once or twice but I've never been inside.

VALERIE – Nor me.

BRONAGH - I wonder what the weather's like on the other side of the mountain....

Bronagh is poring over a map, tracing her route with her finger

...Dungiven...Claudy...Londonderry...

VALERIE – The barman says it's snowing everywhere.

BRONAGH – I hope it's not the start of another 'Big Snow'. I would imagine that two years ago they were cut off for weeks up here in the hills.

VALERIE – Dear Goodness, I hope that's not going to happen to us.

She looks closely at her four tickets. She smiles.

VALERIE – I was a bit worried about leaving these precious items in the car so I brought them with me.

BRONAGH – They look like concert tickets.

VALERIE – They're for the big review in Belfast this July.

BRONAGH – What's the occasion?

VALERIE – It's the special commemoration at Balmoral.

BRONAGH – My oldest lad goes up every year to the agricultural show.

VALERIE – Then, you should definitely book him a ticket for this. It's the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of the Somme and there'll be a parade for all the veterans and a Memorial Service afterwards. We hope Her Majesty will be present. Daddy was in the Ulster Division, you see. He and his brother fought at the Somme. They lost far too many of their best friends that day.

BRONAGH – It will be a sad day for your father with all those memories.

VALERIE - The Somme never leaves daddy's mind for long.

BRONAGH – That First World War was such a terrible waste of young men's lives.

VALERIE – My old man is *very* proud of his soldiering days, though. He keeps telling us it was his greatest honour. Now that he's living with me, he makes sure that I put out our Union Jack out on the flag pole every 1st of July and we keep it flying right up until the Twelfth.

BRONAGH – We are who we are.

VALERIE – Indeed, we are who we are.

Daddy won't be able to parade though, when the Queen comes. He's too unsteady on the old pins. We'll have to put him in a wheelchair and my brother David can push him along. At least, they'll *both* have the honour of taking part.

BRONAGH – An uncle on my mother's side fought in the war.

VALERIE – I'm sure she was very proud of him. Did he survive?

BRONAGH – He did survive, and he lived on into old age.

VALERIE – Very good - another one of those brave Ulstermen who fought at the Somme.

BRONAGH – To be honest, I don't know anything about what my uncle did or where he was. Uncle Malachy died five years ago. He didn't talk about it much.

VALERIE – Sorry, I thought that you...

BRONAGH – That's OK.

VALERIE – I presumed that you were ...

BRONAGH - No, please, never mind.

I was reading the map, you see. It says 'Londonderry' on maps. That was what probably made you think

Strained but genuine laughter

VALERIE – Daddy keeps reminding me that all sorts of Irishmen fought with him in the British Army. ‘You never ask what a fellow’s religion is when you’re beside him in a battle’ - that’s one of his favourite lines.

BRONAGH – After all it was a *world* war, wasn’t it? Young men joined up from all over the globe.

But there’s one anecdote that mother did regale us with. The night before he left for France, our Malachy had a terrible row in a bar in Downpatrick with some fellow or other. I think it was over a girl and I they’d both had too many drinks. The first thing Malachy did when he came back home, four years later, was to put down his bags, walk into the bar and go up to the man he’d had the row with, who was still sitting there, comfy as you like, and still drinking pints, as if the war had never happened. He punched the chap in the face and knocked him clean out.

Laughter

So there you are – sometimes an old grudge lasts a lot longer than a world war!

VALERIE – Did you say Downpatrick?

BRONAGH – I did.

VALERIE – I’m originally from Downpatrick.

BRONAGH – Me too. My name’s Bronagh, by the way. Bronagh Donnelly.

VALERIE – I’m Valerie Moore. I was Carson to my maiden name.

BRONAGH – Well, we’d be wise to get better acquainted if we’re going to spend the night together.

VALERIE – So when did you leave?

BRONAGH – Oh, twenty years ago.

BRONAGH – I left about the same time.

VALERIE – Ah, I get it now. You were one of the Donnelly family from out the Newcastle Road.

BRONAGH – Yes.

VALERIE – Farmers.

BRONAGH – That's us.

VALERIE - I can place you now.

BRONAGH – So were you the Carson's that owned the grocer's shop in the town? Or were you the Carson's of the bridge?

VALERIE – We owned the shop. But I've been living in Belfast for a long time, now.

BRONAGH – And I'm living just outside Lurgan, we have a dairy farm.

VALERIE - Well, anyway, we're both a long way from home tonight.

BRONAGH - We must have met at some stage when we were children.

VALERIE – Downpatrick was a small place. But there you are, sometimes it's a question of 'same place but separate lives'.

BRONAGH – Isn't it amazing that we know who each other's families are but we don't know each other?

VALERIE – I went to the High School.

BRONAGH – I was at the Convent in Ballynahinch.

VALERIE – The two schools help explain it, I suppose.

BRONAGH – So, what took you away to the big city?

VALERIE – I left to train as a teacher.

BRONAGH – Heavens, we're like mirror images.

VALERIE – Did you teach too?

BRONAGH – I trained at St Mary's. Boarded up there in the big smoke and came back at weekends, for I didn't like Belfast one bit. Got a job in a primary school in Lurgan after college, then I met my husband and settled down.

VALERIE – It was Stranmillis College for me. I met my husband when I was on teaching practice in Antrim. We moved to Belfast to be close to his work – and what with raising a family and all of that...I didn't go back.

BRONAGH – Back to the teaching or back to Downpatrick?

VALERIE – Neither, I'm glad to say!

Smiles... Laughter...

I didn't really mean that. About Downpatrick...

My two youngsters have flown the nest but I'm looking after my father now. He's 79 and he's got awfully frail. Then there's my poor brother to think about. I was just on my way up to Londonderry to see him tonight.

What about you?

BRONAGH – My girl is still at school and my two boys are both well grown up now- one of them is keen on the farming and one isn't.

VALERIE – I'm sorry about the mistake... a moment ago.

BRONAGH – Easily done.

Smiles all round then a moment's quietness

Listen to that wind.

VALERIE - Not getting any better, is it?

If this had happened when I was younger, I'd have been praying for more snow. Then I could have had Monday morning in bed instead of struggling to teach thirty sleepy children the joys of history and geography.

BRONAGH - Would you care for that drink you mentioned?

VALERIE – I would indeed.

BRONAGH – I'll buy it.

VALERIE – Ah, thank you, you're very kind. And could you ask the barman about the phone. It wasn't working earlier. Thank you...Bronagh.

She leaves.

Valerie takes her coat off, warms up, brings a few items out of her bag including a newspaper and a letter in an envelope. We can hear the jukebox.

Bronagh returns with two drinks and a newspaper.

BRONAGH – Those tickets for your big event are out very early. We're still in February.

VALERIE - My father is all excited already. And if Remembrance Day is anything to go by, on the night before the review, he will get me to polish all his medals and press his trousers and shine his boots till I can see my face in them.

Pause...

You said you had an uncle in the war. Have you still got his medals?

BRONAGH – No, I'm afraid we haven't, though we do have a medal belonging to my father. That's another story.

VALERIE - There are so many terrific stories from back then, aren't there? I sometimes think I could live in the past.

Bronagh resumes her paper and takes a pen out to start her crossword. Valerie puts the items back in her bag then sits and looks at her and says –

It was daddy's stories that inspired my brother David, - that and his songs.

BRONAGH – Does your father sing?

VALERIE – Billy Carson sings and plays a mouth organ any time you let him. He treats us each November to the songs he sang in the trenches. He's always a bit out of tune, and he probably drove the Germans mad with his recitals, but never mind....we tell him he's got a great voice.

So, what with all of that exposure to the war, no-one was surprised when David went to secondary school and joined the cadets. Do you know about the cadets?

BRONAGH – They didn't have them at the convent.

VALERIE – Oh, you'll have to see a picture of him then.

BRONAGH – Go ahead.

VALERIE – There you are, that was him in his cadet uniform. 1949. He looks smart there, doesn't he?

BRONAGH – He was a handsome lad.

VALERIE – He got good marks and the teacher told him he was fit for university but David said that college just wasn't for him. So I was the one who got bundled off to Stranmillis, while he went away to the forces. He was just 16 and mother had passed away the year before and that was why David got into the way of writing me the long letters.

He came home from Cyprus in the summer of 1960. I'm afraid he was a much changed man. Do you remember about Cyprus?

BRONAGH – The Cypriots were keen to kick the British out, if I recollect.

VALERIE – Well, as David saw it, the army were keeping the Greeks and the Turks from cutting one another's throats. He saw some terrible things that he still can't get around to telling me about. He was stationed in Ebrington when he returned, and they gave him very little leave and that's what I blame. They kept him on for a year after the breakdown and discharged him. The house he moved to was a few yards from the barracks. But he's moved digs since then and it's unsettled him.

BRONAGH – Has he managed to get a job?

VALERIE – He never holds onto one for long. He's fallen in with some church or other, now. They have their own pastor. From the latest letter it sounds like an unusual set up. But if it keeps him out of the pub, that's good. Daddy keeps saying that David has shell-shock. Says he knew lots of soldiers that were affected by it, after the war.

Pause...

So, your father was presented with a medal?

BRONAGH - That's right.

VALERIE – But he wasn't in the forces?

BRONAGH – No.

VALERIE – Was it a religious medal?

BRONAGH – Not a religious medal, no, good Catholics and all as we are... let's say that it was a medal for bravery.

VALERIE – Forgive me for being nosey but...

BRONAGH -So you want to know what the medal was for?

Pause...

VALERIE – I'm curious.

BRONAGH - Can you keep a secret?

VALERIE – I'll try.....

BRONAGH – My father was a veteran of the Easter Rising.

VALERIE – Really...?

BRONAGH – Really and truly.

VALERIE – The famous rebellion?

BRONAGH – The very one. Are you shocked?

VALERIE – No, no, I.....well, yes I am.

BRONAGH - A little bit taken aback at least...?

VALERIE – It would be a conversation stopper in my part of the city.

BRONAGH – Well, it looks like we're going to be badly stuck for conversation, for the rest of the night, then.

Awkward pause...

VALERIE - Do you know if they have guest rooms here?

BRONAGH – You aren't running away from me, are you?

VALERIE – Just asking. Like you, I've never been in this place before.

BRONAGH – The barman says they used to do bed and breakfast but the rooms are all locked up now. He said he'd see about opening them up but he to be honest he didn't seem too keen.

VALERIE – So, maybe we might have to get a few hours of shut eye sitting right here where we are.

BRONAGH – Side by side by the electric fire.... I'd say another whiskey or two will be required.

VALERIE – Well, at least we're out of that blizzard.

BRONAGH - Thank God. So, when did you arrive?

VALERIE – I pulled into the carpark half an hour ago, just as the snow came on. I haven't shifted from this place since. I was never so glad to see a pub carpark in all my life - the sound of music, the human voices and that big red sign shining out of the darkness - Halfway House. You see my husband is forever telling me off for driving at night by myself and I know he would have an epileptic fit if he saw me now.

A moment of quietness inside the anteroom but not in the pub

Still seem to be plenty of drinkers out there; the locals clearly don't let a bit of heavy snow put them off their beer.

BRONAGH – Sorry, I forgot to tell you – the barman says that the phone's still not working.

VALERIE – There must be telephone lines down all over the place.

BRONAGH – I don't think that the barmen around here are too used to women asking questions, or even ordering drinks for that matter. Not the older women, anyway. I suppose the younger ones do as they please.

Well, here's to the completion of our journey....

Drinks glasses are 'clinked' then they drink

VALERIE – Stranded in the hills and a long way from home.

BRONAGH - Your brother is going to have a long, sleepless night.

VALERIE – David doesn't sleep well at the best of times.

Have you got someone waiting up for you?

BRONAGH – I was hoping to pick up my son.

VALERIE – Is he working up there?

BRONAGH – No, he was visiting his old landlady in Gweedore. That's in Donegal. She's the lady who looked after him one summer when he did his Irish in the Gaeltacht. You get a chance to go to the Gaeltacht if you are at a Catholic school. But maybe you know all about that.... he really loved it there. And he likes going back to Gweedore from time to time.

VALERIE – Is he the one that *doesn't* want to take over the farm?

BRONAGH – Yes, his brother will do that, but definitely not him.

VALERIE – What's his name?

BRONAGH – Pearse.

Pause...

Another shock, Valerie..?

Don't worry, he's just a scholar. He's in his first year at university. I was meant to pick him up in Derry so that he wouldn't miss his lectures at Queens on Monday.

Pause ...

VALERIE – I'm still feeling chilly.

BRONAGH – Here let's both move closer to the fire. The barman gave me this newspaper. We could do the crossword.

VALERIE –I have a bit of reading to catch up on. Give me a shout if you need help with any of the clues.

She starts to look at her several letters, while Bronagh half-studies her newspaper. Valerie peers further at her letters. Music in background

BRONAGH – Don't tell me the stories about the Donnelly family never reached your ears.

VALERIE – Well, you don't listen to stories, do you, if you want to live at peace with your neighbour.

Pause...

Was your family really so different from mine?

BRONAGH – If you'd visited me when we were children, Valerie, you'd have seen the difference.

VALERIE – I suppose you heard about the Easter Rising the way we heard about the Somme. Or is that too simple?

BRONAGH – No, that's fair enough. But remember that I was a Donnelly, so I knew not to talk about the Rising beyond what people always refer to as 'our own kind.'

Pause...

Ask your father if he still remembers my father. I'd be surprised if he didn't.

He would have been 82 next month if he'd still been alive. He had a bad fall, back in October and then he caught pneumonia and in a couple of weeks it was all over.

VALERIE – I'm sorry.

BRONAGH - He was such an active man too. He rode a motor bike right up until he was seventy five, and never a bone broken. He'd ridden them ever since they were invented, I think.

You know what; I might just have a cigarette. If that barman comes in, he'll be shocked - two mature women drinking *and* smoking and not a husband in sight to keep an eye on either of us.

Rummaging

Oops, I've run out. Damn and blast. Just have to stick to the alcohol.

VALERIE - That's another thing my husband doesn't approve of. Smoking...

Pause...

Sorry, can you tell me more about your father?

BRONAGH – Are you sure you want to hear?

VALERIE – Yes, I think so.

BRONAGH – What would you like to know?

VALERIE - Tell me about his medal.

BRONAGH – Presented in 1941.

VALERIE – During the war....?

BRONAGH – The Emergency, as it was called across the border. The Free State decided to alleviate the gloom and celebrate twenty five years since the Rising.

VALERIE – My daddy still isn't too pleased about the south being neutral. If he heard about them handing out medals he would have been livid.

BRONAGH – Handing them out to Ulster men too! Anyway, an official from the Free State Government drove up to the border to meet father and hand over the medal.

VALERIE – The roads long the border were a smuggler's paradise....

BRONAGH – And that's why we drove to Warrenpoint to catch the ferry. I mean, we didn't know whether the customs people might alert the police and we'd get into trouble. So it was the ferry for us. We docked at Omeath, and this wee man in a long overcoat and a fedora was standing there. He handed a wee brown paper parcel to my father and then he saluted him. We went back on the next ferry and when we got into the car, my father pulled the string on the parcel and unfolded the paper and there it was. The medal...

VALERIE – What did it look like?

BRONAGH – Freshly polished gold. Father lifted it up by the orange and green ribbon, and then he placed it in my palm and I remember running my finger all across the surface – do you know what the design is on the 1916 medal?

VALERIE – I don't know, is it a harp maybe?

BRONAGH – No.

VALERIE - Is it a shamrock?

BRONAGH – Try again.

VALERIE – Well I take it that it *wasn't* a picture of the King.

BRONAGH – It was engraved with an image of Cuchullain. You know, the famous warrior, with his pet bird on his shoulder and a sword in his hand.

So there we were, father and daughter together in the old Morris car, by the edge of Carlingford Lough and the wartime sun still shining. It's the stuff of memories. Father asked me to pin the medal on the lapel of his suit... and then the two of us took a walk along the seafront to the shops.

Do you remember the coupons?

VALERIE – How could I forget?

BRONAGH – Father had brought two of them with us from home. So we went in to an ice cream parlour and ordered two cones. That was a treat in war-time, I can tell you.

VALERIE – Don't tell me he wore the medal in the shop?

BRONAGH – Did he or what? But all the while we were in there ordering ice cream it was well hidden underneath his overcoat. Boy, when we got back into the car, we laughed. Of course, when we arrived home, he paraded around the house with it on, like a peacock with two tails, but then that's the difference, Valerie. You can parade your courage in public but we can't.

A moment of quietness

VALERIE – Did he ever get a chance to wear it in public?

BRONAGH – The southern government kept on inviting him down to commemorations in Dublin, but he never went. Father hated the Free State, medal or no medal.

VALERIE – Why was that?

BRONAGH - He thought that the south should have fought on.

VALERIE – Fought on?

BRONAGH – After partition...

But I can feel my father's ghost tapping me on the shoulder - 'You've said too much, girl...'

VALERIE – I hope you keep that medal safely hidden away.

BRONAGH – Well, we're careful where we keep it and we're reluctant to talk about it. Or at least I was reluctant until tonight. Maybe I will regret not sticking to that old Ulster motto.

VALERIE – What one?

BRONAGH - 'Whatever you say, say nothing...'

VALERIE – It's only a piece of metal and a ribbon, Bronagh....

BRONAGH – Don't dismiss a medal, just because you don't sympathise with the cause.

VALERIE – No, sorry, what I meant was - it isn't guns we're talking about now, it's just medals! A medal is a piece of history, it's an emblem, it's an important symbol but that is all.

BRONAGH – It's a reminder of your true identity.

VALERIE – And that's all. We're not talking about guns now, and that's the main thing.

Not since the IRA dumped their arms.

BRONAGH – Here's a general knowledge question for you. How long ago did they do that?

VALERIE – Some time in 1962. My brother would know the exact date.

BRONAGH – Well here is another question. How many times since 1962 have the Special Constabulary visited the Donnelly household?

VALERIE – I've no idea.

BRONAGH – Try...

VALERIE – I give up

BRONAGH – No, you have to try.

Valerie looks defeated

Four times - every year in fact, regular as Christmas.

Back before 1962, when the Border Campaign was on, they used to do a search of our barns. On a couple of occasions they asked to see inside the house. They were polite, I'll grant you that. They never gave us any lip. In fact we knew one of them quite well – a decent neighbour in his own way and a very religious man. But since 1962 the supervision has still gone on. There's the knock at the door and a couple of questions, just to let us know that they know who we are and why they're there.

My father always kept to his bedroom when they called. He worried that he wouldn't trust his tongue.

VALERIE – Maybe those B men knew that your father wanted to fight on.

BRONAGH – But that was forty years before.

VALERIE – A short time in our part of the world.

Pause...

Daddy always talks about the border. He says that Carson and Craig betrayed the Protestants in the south but that it had to be.

BRONAGH – The whole thing was wrong, the partition of the country, that monstrosity at Stormont, and worst of all, that phoney republic in Dublin. Bah, my father spent so much of his life angry and disappointed about it all.

Maybe that's why he called me Bronagh.

VALERIE – Sorry...?

BRONAGH – Bronagh comes from an Irish word. It means sadness.

VALERIE – Oh dear

BRONAGH - But in truth, father shouldn't have been so sad. The Donnelly's started with nothing but a few acres of bad old ground and they rose to become some of the best sheep farmers in the north. But with regard to the politics of this island...? He just thought they were hopeless.... But as he got older there was less and less anger, and more and more disappointment. The B Specials needn't have worried in the end.

VALERIE – At least he had his medal.

BRONAGH – ...With twenty five years to wait for it and another twenty five to hide it? No, he used to go into a lament, every time it came to Easter. He had all kinds of complaints.... 'The Proclamation was meant to be for Irishmen and Irish women but look at Ireland, now. Name a woman politician if you can.' Then he would quote James Connolly to me – 'the working man is a slave and the woman is a slave of that slave.' Of course, when I was old enough and cheeky enough I used to rebuke him. 'Tommy Donnelly, you are preposterous. You are a prosperous farmer, and what is more you're a typical Irish male in the way you treat women, and you're giving me lessons from James Connolly, the red, socialist agitator? Come on!!'

He didn't like me challenging him one bit.

VALERIE – And what did he say about Northern Ireland? What did he say about us?

BRONAGH – I wouldn't want to repeat some of the words he came out with when we were younger. Mother used to bid him be quiet. But then again, when you're a farmer, you have to get along with your neighbours. I remember seeing him at the mart in the town, chatting with some of them.

VALERIE – What do you think they were talking about?

BRONAGH – The price of wool maybe, or bad weather... Farmers always talk about bad weather. I doubt if my father ever got around to talking to the men about anything else.

How could you talk about what you didn't even have an agreed name for?

I mean, he never allowed us to call this place 'Northern Ireland' – and so, in our house at least, we never did.

We would have got a clip around the ear. No, he was the boss in these matters and it rubbed off on us all. He was the big influence, not my mother.

VALERIE – My girls tell me that I let my husband order me about and that I ought to be angry about it

BRONAGH – I've been feeling angry with my father ever since he died, just after he'd promised to go down to Dublin at long last.

A moment of quietness

VALERIE – Will it be a big event this year?

BRONAGH – What do you think?

VALERIE – It's important to you, I suppose, like the Somme is important for us.

BRONAGH – So what do you feel about it?

VALERIE – I can understand things happening in the south, but I don't think they should happen in the north, Bronagh. Definitely not... they would stir up old fears that we can all do without. My brother David was talking about that very matter, in his letter. He's very opposed to it.

BRONAGH – Some people here will want to hold a parade, though. You can be sure of that.

VALERIE – Will you go, if they do?

BRONAGH – Yes.

VALERIE – Would your father have gone to one of the parades up here if he had still been alive?

BRONAGH – If he had wanted to attend, I would have gone with him.

VALERIE – I think I need another drink. Do you want one?

BRONAGH – Yes, please.

VALERIE – It's my turn.

Music on the jukebox as Valerie returns with some drinks.

VALERIE – I was struggling to see where I was going, out there in the bar. I left my glasses in the car, you see. You probably noticed me trying my best to read David's letter. He put his new address at the top of it and I'm blowed if I can see it.

BRONAGH – Do you want me to read it for you?

VALERIE – No, no, definitely not, I don't think you would want to examine the contents of David's rambling letters.... Thanks all the same. I'll get the glasses from the car in the morning.

BRONAGH - Hopefully the snow ploughs will be out in the morning and we'll be on our way.

VALERIE – I'll have to get my car looked at first. The engine was shuddering, going up that hill.

BRONAGH –Why, don't you ask if there's a mechanic among all those lovely young men out there?

VALERIE – No, let's wait. If the snow clears in the morning, I'll go up and try the engine again. It might just be OK.

BRONAGH – Whatever you think.

VALERIE - I'm always a bit better at helping other people, than I am at asking for help for myself.

BRONAGH – You're a typical Irish woman, Valerie.

Laughter

VALERIE – Irish or British, we women are always our own worst enemies. I get these letters from my brother when he's in a crisis. And of course I rush off to try and sort things out for him. But does he listen to my advice? No.

Then there is my husband who was still in the office this evening, Lord knows why, and so I had to leave father on his own in the house and neither of them will cook a morsel for themselves till I get back.

I've got worries at both ends of my road.

The juke box is on again with a song from the mid-sixties.

Good Lord, listen to that song. We could do with a better tune than that to cheer us both.

Pause...

Bronagh, my father was a B Special. So was my uncle and they both served from 1920 until they retired together from the shop in 1959. I thought I'd better be straight. And also, I must say that I *am* proud of them, very proud of them both.

BRONAGH – I have no doubt you are.

VALERIE - I think I have to be a bit more honest about myself.

BRONAGH – So, why did they join?

VALERIE – Daddy told me when he came back from the trenches all he wanted was to run his business and have a family life. He'd seen too much blood and destruction. And so he and his brother Joe soon got their business up and running again. They'd had a lorry before the war. They'd had the name of their business written on the side of the van. 'William and Joseph Carson, household supplies...' And by 1920 they were getting lots of new orders and they even delivered the groceries for the local gentry.

BRONAGH – There were lots of big local families near Downpatrick, weren't there?

VALERIE - The Crawford and the Taylors....for a start.

BRONAGH – One family owned the castle and the other owned the mill.

VALERIE – So one day in 1920, daddy and my uncle Joe had just dropped off the groceries at the Crawford's place when they were summoned into a barn where Captain Crawford was addressing a handful of other men that worked on the estate. He explained how there was a new organisation being formed in the town hall and it was called the Special Constabulary. It was being set up to protect Ulster from the IRA and it was the duty of every Protestant man to join.

And that's what they did. They joined.

BRONAGH – Why?

VALERIE – Well, they did what Captain Crawford said you should do. It was their duty. He had been with them at the front.

BRONAGH – Even after the war? Even after following their elders and betters into the trenches had turned out to be a terrible mistake?

VALERIE – That's not how daddy saw the war, Bronagh. For him, the Somme was a sacrifice.

BRONAGH – It was a terrible tragedy, I'll grant you that.

VALERIE – But it was an honour too. You see, my father felt that the Somme almost had to happen, to show Britain once and for all just how true and loyal we Ulster Protestants are.

BRONAGH – Surely nothing like the Somme ever *has* to happen?

VALERIE – Did the Rising *have* to happen? Who knows....but all these things *did* happen, Bronagh, and they are what they are.. .

So after finishing their grocery rounds, granny made the tea, and the boys walked into the centre of Downpatrick and went in through the door of the very same town hall they'd entered six years before when they joined the Ulster Division, on their way to the Somme.

BRONAGH - No doubt they were given a rifle.

VALERIE – Yes.

BRONAGH – And a B special uniform....

VALERIE – The uniform took some time to come. But yes, it arrived. And daddy was proud to wear it. But what you also have to realise, Bronagh, was the fear, back then. Uncle Joe still says you could have cut it with a knife.

BRONAGH - The town was miles away from the riots in Belfast and it was miles from the border.

VALERIE – But we were afraid.

BRONAGH – Afraid of whom?

VALERIE - Afraid of you....

As Uncle Joe still says - ‘Those fellows had been waiting around for us in the long grass for two hundred years or more, and now their knives had been sharpened and they were ready to leap out and cut our throats.’

And if that’s not fear, I don’t know what fear is.

A moment of uncertainty then quietness

BRONAGH – Do you ever think that we might have been afraid too? About what was going to happen if that border went up and stayed for good?

A moment of quietness

I wonder too, did your father ever know about the Easter Proclamation?

VALERIE – He would have known about it but he wouldn’t have read it. Why?

BRONAGH – I think he might have been less afraid if he had read it. And we might all be a bit less afraid today if someone somewhere on this island had implemented it. I knew it off by heart as a child.

VALERIE – You weren’t taught it at school, I hope? That would confirm my daddy’s worst fears of the Convent.

BRONAGH – No, most of the nuns steered well clear of talking about the Rising. I picked it up at home, courtesy of tuition from my father. And there was one phrase that my father always loved to recite. Can I recite it to you?

VALERIE – Go ahead.

BRONAGH - 'The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien Government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.'

Tell me what could have been so frightening to the Carson boys about that?

VALERIE – For a start, my father did not fight for an alien government but his own beloved country. Then there's the reality that he faced the German army for four long years, that he was shelled and gassed and yet he coped with it all with composure from what I can see, so if he was so horrified by the legacy of the Rising when he came back home, then there must have been a reason.

They were fair men as well as brave men, my father and my uncle. Give twenty shillings in the pound and make no false deals...that has been their philosophy. Attend Church on the Sabbath, fear your God and Honour the King... march with the lodge and wear your collarette with pride but treat your Catholic neighbour right, so long as he treats you right and obeys the laws of the country where you both must live.

We were never brought up as children to hate our Catholic neighbours. Any talk like that in our house, when we were children, and daddy came down hard on us at once.

BRONAGH - Our house was no different, for father may have despised the politicians but you had a clip round the ear if you were found speaking ill of your neighbours.

VALERIE – So, where does all the fear and hate come from, then? Must come from somewhere!

BRONAGH – You tell me.

VALERIE – You tell me.

More music from the jukebox.

BRONAGH – Valerie, it's 1966. Listen to the young people out there. They don't feel about the past, like we do. Of course, I regret that fact but it's the stark reality. Who cares about duty now? And how many of the lads out there could recite the Proclamation? None.

VALERIE – When I think about Billy and Joe Carson, that is the one word in my head more than any other - duty.

When I was a youngster, and my father had done a long day in the shop, the two brothers would head out on their bicycles in their B Special uniforms, with their rifles slung over their backs. They went out to man a road block or guard an electricity sub-station and they could be out all night long in the pouring rain. Sometimes daddy didn't get in until dawn and pull off his coat and he'd lie on a couple of sacks of meal in the back shop, rather than disturb the family. He'd sleep there until it was eight o'clock and time to open up the doors and start all over again.

But I suppose you are going to tell me that your father did his duty in the Rising. No doubt he did.

Pause... Valerie brings out a few victuals from her bag and moves closer to the fire. Eventually she summons Bronagh to join her in drinking a cup of tea and eating a sandwich or a biscuit

BRONAGH – Dublin was a long way off in the spring of 1916. But he read about the trouble in Dublin in the newspaper on Easter Tuesday and so by Wednesday night he had 'borrowed' a motor bike...

VALERIE – Stole it, in other words...

BRONAGH – Stole, if you insist... but he rode all the way down to Dublin overnight. He had a can of fuel on the back and a gun and ammunition in an old sack.

VALERIE – Did the family know where he'd gone?

BRONAGH – He left a note for my grandma and another for my mother.

VALERIE – Didn't he know his future brother in law was a British soldier?

BRONAGH – Malachy? Oh, yes, my father and Malachy would have known each other well before the war.

VALERIE – And if Malachy had been on leave from the front he could have been sent post haste to Dublin to quell the Rising, so your father could have shot him.

BRONAGH – Malachy was in France at the time.

VALERIE – Even so.... your father must have fired live bullets at British soldiers. They were Malachy's comrades. What did your grandparents think of that? What did your mother think?

BRONAGH – After the Rising was over, they got the word that Tommy Donnelly had been taken away to Wales. He was in a prisoner of war camp, a guest of His Majesty. The story goes that her family all told my mother that she must never speak to him again.

VALERIE – But she *did*!

BRONAGH – Oh yes, and she wrote letters to him in Wales. I have them in a drawer at home.

VALERIE - And then she married him.

What did the parents say to that?

BRONAGH – Everything had changed by then. After the executions, after the prison camp, and after the police went driving round our countryside in lorries, armed to the teeth with guns. My family began to see what father had done in a different light.

VALERIE – But hadn't Malachy written to your mother from the trenches?

BRONAGH – I don't know. She never said anything about that.

VALERIE – I still can't understand. Where was her loyalty?

BRONAGH –

Angry

For you, my father is a traitor, and always will be one, isn't that just it?

VALERIE – It's not a word I would want to use.

BRONAGH – What word would you want to use, then?

Silence

Don't imagine my mother didn't weigh things up. She was just a young girl back then but she was deep. She knew her history. In my childhood, when she wasn't working, you would always see her with a book in her hand. She told me when she was young, before she met my father, that she walked the two miles into Downpatrick and attended Sunday night Irish classes that the priest organised. I know she must have worried for Malachy during the war. I know she loved him. But I believe she understood why father had to do what he did.

And of course, I have also asked myself - why did father feel so strongly about Irish freedom, when none of the other young men that sat beside him at Mass each Sunday stirred themselves to fight in 1916?

VALERIE – And why do you think it was?

BRONAGH – Do you remember the marketplace in our home town?

VALERIE – I do.

BRONAGH – Well, there was an old fellow in a house nearby called Denis Burke. He migrated to America in the Famine years. They say his family died of fever before the boat reached Boston but Denis survived. He travelled to England as a young man and he got arrested for trying to bomb a police station in Manchester. Everyone I knew referred to him as 'Dynamite Burke,' for he had been six years in gaol before he came back to Ireland to live. He used to sit on a chair at his door, even in the coldest of weathers. And father would have been sent down from the farm to sell our eggs, and he would have walked past his door.

Father loved history at school but he disliked everything else. His heart was in the farming, you see. But Dynamite Burke became his first real teacher. The old man had known all the leaders in the Irish Republic Brotherhood, in his day. He told Tommy Donnelly about them all, taught him all the old Irish legends and sang him songs.

By the time he was a grown lad, rumours had gone around that Tommy was a rebel. And it got to the ears of the local gentry, men like Sir Brian Taylor and Captain Crawford.

VALERIE - Those two gents were the greatest of friends.

BRONAGH – Apparently they drove around the countryside in a Rolls Royce.

VALERIE – My father remembers that car and he says there wasn't a vehicle like it in the country.

BRONAGH - ...So the story goes that the two gentlemen were heading into town in the swanky car when it was coming up to Christmas, and they'd already had a few sherries. Sir Brian got the chauffeur to stop when he saw father walking down the street. He leaned out and said, very politely - 'Tommy Donnelly, how are you, my young fellow?' 'I'm feeling fine, sir' my father replied 'How are you both, I hope you are keeping well?' And Sir Brian said back - 'You know, you should leave the old dynamite politics behind. Those are yesterday's grudges, Tommy.' And then he handed out a shilling, pulled up the window and the car drove on.

VALERIE – You know what happened to the old man, don't you?

BRONAGH - I believe he met a bad end.

VALERIE - In 1922.

BRONAGH – I don't know the date.

VALERIE – We were *taught* the date in our house. June 26th to be exact...

Daddy was on patrol with a couple of other men in the grounds of the castle. The Specials had been told to keep an eye on things, because the old chap lived alone and was under threat. At midnight, they found his body lying in the front porch with one bullet wound to the head. Oh, the Rising was six years ago, treaty had been signed. There had been a truce. The border had been drawn. The Free State had been created, Northern Ireland had been born. It seemed that everyone in Ireland had come to the sensible recognition that we would have to stop fighting.

That we were what we were....

But someone in Dublin was not content. The orders had been given. The IRA was to 'fight on'.

Pause...

BRONAGH – You know why he was targeted, don't you?

VALERIE – He was Protestant gentry.

BRONAGH – What do you think the men that raided his house were after?

VALERIE – You're probably in a better position to explain.

BRONAGH – His guns, of course. But let me add, in case of misunderstanding - my father was far away from Downpatrick in 1922...

VALERIE – On the run, may be?

BRONAGH - He was behind bars, and they weren't British bars. The Free State locked him up, just as the civil war began. I was taken down to Dublin in my mother's arms to visit him and they tell me I shook his hand through the bars. We all paid the price for fighting on.

Moment of quietness

VALERIE – It's strange that you could be born in the same town, know so many of the same families, possess the same history, even choose the same career and yet never talk to a girl of your own age.

BRONAGH - But if we had talked back then, would we have told the stories that we've shared tonight?

VALERIE – Maybe.

BRONAGH – Or maybe not.

There's a lot not spoken about outside a family but there are stories that are spread like wildfire too. One night my father went poaching in Sir Brian's estate, hunting for rabbits, just a few months before the war. He was a rebellious lad back then, like I said.

He heard a vehicle come up the drive. So he hid in the shadows and watched the lorry park in front of the mansion, as some fellows jumped out and started

to unload. And there in the porch, watching, with the light shining, were Sir Brian and his friend and neighbour, the captain.

For an hour, a load of heavy sacks were taken into the house. It's was only at the end, when the lorries were driving away that father guessed what was in them, for there, standing proudly in the doorway, were the two honourable gentlemen, one with a rifle in his hands and the other saluting.

The next day, my father walked into a wee house in a back lane in the town and joined the Irish Volunteers. One week later, he was given *his* gun. He hid it behind a bale of straw at the back of the barn, once the world war began. The young men were leaving in droves to fight in France. But not Tommy Donnelly... two years later, he would lift his rifle out of the straw, put it on the back of his bike and head for Dublin.

We all know the rest.

Pause...

VALERIE – Did your father ever tell you about the names written on the side of the lorry that brought in those guns?

BRONAGH – He didn't mention that.

VALERIE –A young man like him would have had good, sharp eyes. I think he could have told you the names, if he'd wanted to.

A hesitation

BRONAGH – 'William and Joseph Carson – household supplies', am I right?

Valerie nods.

VALERIE – That story was in my family too, told from inside that lorry.

Emotional moment... Emotional reactions...

Another musical item on the jukebox ...

VALERIE – I think that snow is beginning to ease.

BRONAGH – Let's hope it turns to rain.

A moment of quietness

VALERIE – I'm sure your son will be glad to see you.

BRONAGH – He's an easy going big lad. He'll stay with a friend in Derry and never give my absence a second thought.

VALERIE – So he's not another rebel, then?

BRONAGH – Not unless rebellions are being fought these days with words.

VALERIE – You said he was a scholar.

BRONAGH – His head is never out of books. But, in the summer he's off to America.

VALERIE – That will be a great experience.

BRONAGH – If there's any hero in my son's mind these days it's Martin Luther King, not the men of 1916.

VALERIE – But when your daddy got there, what happened...?

BRONAGH – He went to the post office.

VALERIE – So he was one of the famous few?

BRONAGH – For a few hours... He arrived on Thursday morning, while it was dark. The British were bombarding the building. By Saturday the Rising would be over. His active service lasted a day and a half.

VALERIE – What did he remember?

BRONAGH – James Connolly lying on a stretcher. Fear taking hold of everyone when the fire caught hold.... Patrick Pearse, standing on a table, speaking to the men, with his face illuminated by the flames.... Winifred Carney, tapping away at her typewriter, taking down every word that Pearse and Connolly said....

But towards the end, father never talked about Easter Week as such. The words of the Proclamation were the one thing left. He could recite them anytime you asked, right up to the last.

He didn't even ask to see the medal.

She starts to settle down, sleepily

I think I'll close my eyes now - try to get a bit of sleep.

VALERIE – Me too. Here's hoping for better weather.

BRONAGH – In every sense....

Laughter and they both settle down, sleepily. Silence...

VALERIE - You know how long my father's experience of the Somme lasted– a day and a half.

BRONAGH – How come?

VALERIE - The Ulster Division were taken out of the line on the 2nd July, because they'd suffered so much. 2,000 young men had made the ultimate sacrifice.

Just three days in total, between the two of them, your father and mine – just 72 hours and we're living with the legacy still.

BRONAGH – But the war went on.

VALERIE – It went on until the Armistice.

BRONAGH –I mean after the Armistice, after the treaty. Here at home.

VALERIE - Can I ask one more question?

BRONAGH – Go ahead.

VALERIE – Do you think this country lost something when we two ladies retired from the classroom?

Much laughter but with a serious, even a sombre edge

Music on the jukebox – 'The Sound of Silence'

END

By making the script of this Play available we are encouraging it to be performed by interested parties as a Play or a Dramatized Reading.

Photocopying of the script, from an original copy is permitted to encourage its use for local performances.

Philip Orr, Author, Historian and Playwright.

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We would appreciate hearing how and where the Play has been performed and presented, and how it has been received.

Please let us know by emailing info@contemporarychristianity.net

Thank you.

January 2016



***"What keeps hearts from falseness ...is that there is
nowhere to hide and plenty of room for vision..."***

JOSEPH BRODSKY

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can learn lessons from the past as we struggle to
work for a better future"***

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HOUSE

**A drama by Philip Orr
About 1916 - set in 1966**



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