

## The Closing Door

*Pat Reid*

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**A**s the prison comes into view I tell myself it's good to be seeing prisoners again. I haven't done any visitation for a while. It's too hard to get parking near town, so I walk the two-mile round trip. Besides, cars parked near prison are liable to be broken into. My ailing '69 Ford Escort has nothing worth stealing, but that won't stop someone trying.

The old Victorian-era building is close to the inner city, a big catchment area for prisoners. Today I go by the waterway running parallel to the prison. For a while I simply watch as ducks and swans move easily on the calm, steel-blue water of the Royal Canal. It's a chance to gather my thoughts before going inside. From here the prison seems bedded in foliage. A solitary grey hulk stranded amid a golden brown layer of reeds and rushes. I slowly make my way across the narrow lock footbridge spanning the canal and go in.

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I'm sitting in a small waiting room that feels like an icebox. The heating system is broken again. Because it's the St. Patrick's Day holiday weekend the room is packed with visitors. I close my eyes and listen to hushed voices amid stamping feet. The cold seeps into my feet from the bare concrete floor. I served six months here in 1973. Ten years on, it's more noisy and very overcrowded. The room is littered with candy wrappers and cigarette ends. The stale odour of beer hangs in the air. I sigh with relief when a guard opens that thick steel door and leads me to the Control Room to be routinely signed in. I empty the contents of my pockets into a metal box in case my bunch of keys sets off alarms.

"Hey, what's this?" I ask, as I get frisked.

"Sorry, Patsy," the guard says. "New orders from upstairs." He does a half-hearted body search, all the while apologizing for the intrusion.

I should not be surprised. The newspapers have been screaming again about the amount of heroin and other hard drugs getting in here. Several prisoners have died recently from overdoses. Prison staff argue that it's either allow drugs in or face an explosion of violence by prisoners. Heroin helps to keep a lid on things. Guards know it's coming in, but

usually choose to ignore it. This new crackdown, like past efforts, will surely fizzle out in a week.

I say hello to three counsellors, also visiting prisoners. The prison chaplain, a young Catholic priest, enters the Control Room and smiles at them. He nods curtly to me. We don't see eye to eye on some things. I figure prisoners have enough problems with low self-esteem without being fed his unremitting theology of sin and guilt.

"We have five prisoners seeking some spiritual counselling tonight." He says this in the tone of a bishop instructing new curates. After all these years I still can't get used to being called a spiritual counsellor. I never set out to be one, but seem to have drifted into that role. I started coming back shortly after my own release to visit friends here. I seldom talk about God or religion, mainly because few raise the subject. All I know about God is that I don't know. Prisoners are generally more concerned with family and personal problems, and getting out of this place.

"There's one newcomer in the isolation wing of the Women's Section, a young lady named Frances Brannigan." Father Burke sighs. "I should add she's HIV positive and hasn't, ah, adjusted to life here." He shrugs. "Any of you care to talk to her?" He looks us over, stroking his chin. "I won't mind if you don't want to do it. Frankly, this worries me. A year ago we had no prisoners with this virus. Now ..." He lets the words hang.

"Sorry, Father." One man shakes his head. "I need to see a couple of fellas from last week." The chaplain glances at me. He really doesn't want me here. The other counsellors are Roman Catholic. Most prisoners are too, in name if not in practice.

"How about you, friend?" The chaplain smiles thinly. "Will you go talk to her?"

"Sure, I'll be happy to see her." I smile back.

"You're from Portside, I gather?"

"Correct, Father," I say, wondering why he asks. "I'm Portside born and bred."

"So is the Brannigan woman. I hear Portsiders can be a clannish lot." He holds up a hand. "No offence meant. Just something I heard."

“Don't believe all you hear, Father. They also say God made the world in seven days.”

“Faith leads us to believe in all sorts of things,” he says smugly.

Suddenly I feel like slapping his face. Not a very friendly sentiment, but he has a way of getting under my skin. He knows it too. Maybe he's got something against Quakers. Or that he just doesn't like women. I take a deep breath, telling myself he's fairly new to this job and needs time. I run the name Frances Brannigan through my memory. It doesn't ring a bell.

“I'll go and see the woman now, if it's okay.” I want out of this room. “Follow Mister Duggan.” Burke nods to a warder.

Duggan leads me down the corridor to the Visiting Area. He's wearing rubber gloves. Something I haven't seen before.

“Why the gloves?” I ask. “Is it prison hygiene day?” He's one of the few male warders I can joke with. “A new dress code in operation?”

“Governor's orders, Patsy.” Duggan grins. “This new AIDS shit has everyone worried here.”

“It does?”

“Yeah.” He shrugs. “We're due to get some danger money. Some of these addicts are mad fuckers, Patsy. Here, take this.” He hands me a red Bic lighter.

“What's this for?”

“We've restricted her smoking privileges.” He shrugs. “She set fire to her mattress a couple of nights ago. She's only allowed to smoke with someone present.” He smiles. “Could be she's seeing you because she gets to smoke freely during visits.”

“Could be,” I shove the lighter into my shirt pocket.

“Be careful, Patsy, she's a handful.” He lowers his voice. “She hasn't had visitors that I know of. That's understandable.”

“Oh? Why so?”

“This AIDS thing . . .”

“I thought she's only HIV.”

“The same fucking thing, isn't it?” He flexes a gloved hand. “If she gets upset she could try to bite or scratch you. Want some gloves? Better safe than sorry.”

“No thanks, Mister Duggan. Them things only make me break out in a rash.”

“Suit yourself. If she’s any bother just shout and we’ll come a running like the fucking clappers.” From somewhere along the main corridor I hear singing. It’s a female voice crooning an old island song in Gaelic. The voice is both melancholy and beautiful. I feel sad listening to the only Irish language song I ever learned. A schoolteacher made me sing it over and over until I knew it by heart. He used a bamboo cane on me again and again until I knew the song to my very bones, and hated it with all my heart. Something in her voice tells me the singer is far from home. Some prisoners are from distant places and have few visitors. They sometimes welcome a chance to talk. I’m amazed at how much they’ll tell me about themselves. Funny how ordinary things in life become so important on being deprived of them. Like being able to open a door and walk anywhere I want, anytime I like.

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Frances Brannigan leans against the bare concrete wall, thin white hands folded across her chest. Her fingers dig deep into her arms, leaving pale marks. She seems deep in thought, her face lowered and turned slightly away from me. She looks up as I walk into the room set aside for such visits.

“Hello, Patsy,” she says softly. “I was hopin’ you’d be the visitor they mentioned.” I stand in silence for a moment, gawking at my godmother’s youngest daughter.

“Fran?” I say, finding my voice. “Jeez, it’s been years. I didn’t know your name.”

“It’s me, okay.” She laughs easily. “I married Des Brannigan.”

“Thah explains it. How are yeh doin’, Fran?” She looks jaded, tired, with dark-ringed eyes.

“I’ve lost weight, Patsy. Probably overdid things at Weight Watchers is all.” She laughs. “I mus’ look like death warmed up. Swear the fuck if I turn sideways I’m almos’ invisible.”

“Whah are yeh doin’ in here, Fran?”

“Thah’s a nice way to say hello to a cousin.” She comes toward me, arms held out.

“It’s lovely to see yeh, Fran.” I wrap my arms around her. “It’s been too long.” I hug her hard, then ease up, feeling bones through the thin blouse.

“Sit yerself down an’ talk to me,” she says. “One of the girls here tol’ me yeh still visit this shithouse. Yeh mus’ be fuckin’ mad?”

I see the twinkle in her eyes and smile. “I mus’ be, Fran.”

She picks up a metal fold-up chair lying against the wall and sits it facing the light coming through the barred window. Tilting it back on its rear legs, she turns her face sideways, as if absorbing whatever heat is given off by a pale, watery sun. The slanting light casts a yellow glow on one side of her face. I feel my feet going numb from the concrete floor and stamp them a couple of times. I, too, place my chair to catch the sunlight.

“Smoke, Patsy?” She offers me a cigarette.

“No thanks, love.” I feel a sudden, intense desire for one quick puff. “I’m trying to quit. Been off them six weeks now.”

“Yeah? Six whole weeks?” She smiles knowingly. “Well, best of luck to yeh.” I hand her the lighter. I’ll ask about the mattress burning, but not yet. Her HIV worries me more.

“Wish I could give ‘em up.” She stares at curling smoke, shaking her head. “But not here. This place jus’ gives me the creeps.” She points to a wall poster beside her. “What does thah thing say, Patsy?”

“It’s the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. They sometimes hold AA meetings in here.”

“Holy Christ.” She hisses. “How did I end up in this bleedin’ place?”

“You tell me, love,” I say. “Last time I saw yeh things were goin’ great.”

“Thah was five years ago, Patsy.” She smiles at me and I feel awful for not keeping in touch. “Things change, yeh know?”

“I know. I heard yeh were livin’ in Liverpool.” I add, “Didn’ know yeh got married.”

“Yeah, it was great too . . . at first.” She drags hard on her cigarette. “But Des was still usin’ smack. He swore he’d get off it when Tara was born.”

“He didn’, eh?”

“He tried, Patsy. He got on methadone but missed the buzz from smack. After a while he jus’ gave up tryin’ to give up. One day I was

feelin' real low with cramps an he gave me a hit. Said it would cheer me up no end." She looks up, her gaze steady. "Yeh know the funny thing? Des was right. Heroin made me feel really good. Only when the social workers took Tara into foster care did I come down hard." She sighs. "I'm sure yeh hear such things all the time in here."

"I know heroin, Fran. When it takes over all else falls by the way."

"I remember somethin' yeh said years ago."

"Whah's thah, Fran?"

"Thah the only time yeh felt really alive was while usin' smack. Cloud nine, yeh called it."

"Cloud nine. Did I say thah?" I know I did. Suddenly nine years of being clean seem like nothing. "I was dead wrong, Fran."

"Were yeh?" She looks at me, unblinking. I turn to gaze out the window. "Heroin is somethin' else, yeh know?"

"I was wrong," I say more forcefully. "Believe me, love, it only ends in shit."

"So they say." She shrugs. "Maybe whah's wrong now was right then?" I have no answer. She's right, of course. Nothing comes close to a heroin high. This is stupid thinking. I'm not that person any more. "I'm glad yeh were able to kick it all those years ago." She leans over to pat my hand.

"I was lucky is all."

"Yeh did it on yer own, Patsy," she says admiringly. "Stone cold turkey." We both fall silent as a nearby church bell tolls the hours.

"Four o'clock an' all's well." Fran smiles. "Is it, Fran? I hear tell yeh have the HIV?"

"True." She licks cracked lips, looking hard at me. "But I won't die here, Patsy."

"Who said anythin' about dyin" . . . ?"

"Me." She holds up a hand. "I seen Des Brannigan die with this. He jus' took to his bed an' gave up. I know whah I know. All I want is to see Tara before I kick the bucket."

"How will she feel if she sees yeh?" I ask doubtfully.

"She'll never see me, Patsy. I swear on Ma's grave. I'll go see her play in the schoolyard. I've done it a few times before. I don' let her know I'm there cos she'd get upset if she saw me."

"I can check on her while yer in here." I offer. "It'll be no bother."

“Thanks, but I need to satisfy my own two eyes.” She glances at the door. “I won’ die here.”

“Yeh don’ have to,” I say. “I’ll try to arrange a transfer to Appleyard Hospital. They’ve opened up a new section for HIV . . . .”

“I heard of it,” she cuts in. “Sadie Gilbert from Dock Lane visits her brother there. She says it’s all high security. More a prison than a hospital. She says them who work there are scared shitless of catchin’ the thing.” We both fall silent as Mister Duggan briefly glances in at us.

“Whah are yeh in for, Fran?”

“Attempted robbery from a post office.” She shrugs. “An off-duty cop arrested me. They gave me three years.” She says softly, “Thah’s two years an’ three months with good behaviour.”

“It’s too much for attempted robbery.”

“Well . . . She gazes down at chewed fingernails. “I threatened the post office clerk with a blood-filled syringe. Thah may explain it.”

“Yeah, thah surely explains it.”

“It was only cow’s blood I got from a butcher’s shop,” she says in a rush. “I swear to God.”

“I didn’ say anythin’, Fran.”

“Yeh don’ have to. I see it in yer two eyes. I know it was a crazy fuckin’ thing to do, but I was desperate for money.” She stabs out her cigarette. “Real desperate.”

“I know, Fran.”

“Did yeh miss yer girl?” She’s suddenly changing the subject. “Like, after her adoption?”

“I knew she’d have a better life out of Portside.” I say after a moment, “I was only fifteen, Fran. I did the best thing.”

“Yeh did, Patsy,” Fran says fervently. “But yeh still think about her from time to time?”

“Every day. I’m still her mother, in name if nothin’ else.”

“Then yeh mus’ know how I feel?” she insists.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Know what I think?” She leans forward, eyes narrowed. “A dead mother is better than a bad one. I’ve been a brutal one for Tara.” I say nothing, taken aback by her self-hatred. She, too, falls silent, just watching smoke curl from the end of her cigarette. “I fucked up instead of raisin’ her good.” She absently flicks ash onto a piece of tinfoil in her hand, frowning. “But I will see her one more time. No one will stop me.” Fran says it like night following day, a forgone conclusion. She reaches

for another cigarette but the pack is empty. She crushes it, squeezing it again and again, then tosses a paper ball against the door.

“Fran, I don see how . . .”

“I know how.” She whispers, glancing at the door. “When they take me to hospital for tests on Monday mornin’. Yeh know the Radiology block facin’ the prison?”

“Sure, but . . .”

“Thah’s where I’ll come out,” she says excitedly. “It’s an entrance for medical supplies.”

“Surely they’ll be watchin’ yer every move?”

“Until I go into Oncology.” She nods. “Then the guard relaxes an’ has a smoke an’ a read of the newspaper. I know how they work.” Fran smiles. “I make my way from Oncology through Renal then out the rear corridor to Radiology.” She laughs. “Christ, I mus’ sound like a medical book. But I know the place like the back of my . . .”

“Fran . . .”

“Once outside I’ll pass as ordinary. We wear our own clothes to the hospital cos other patients get nervous at the sight of prison gear.” She smiles and I know she’s determined to do it. I wait for the shoe to drop.

“I need to ask yeh a big favor, Pa . . .”

“No, Fran . . .”

“Jus’ hear me out,” she pleads, gripping my hands. “Please, for old times sake.”

“Yer on yer own, woman,” I say. “It’s a crazy idea.”

“Then I’m fuckin’ crazy.” She whispers, letting go of my hands, “Anyway, I’m leavin’ here.”

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We walk back along the corridor and Mr. Duggan unlocks her cell door. As she enters, Fran grips my hands again. “Maybe I’ll get to see yeh again?” she says, kissing my cheek. “Yeh know where I am.”

“See yeh, Fran.”

I’m collecting my things from the Control room when Father Burke enters. “I hear from Mister Duggan that you and Frances Brannigan got on well,” he says with a thin smile. “You know each other?” Burke asks.

“Yeah, Fran and me go back a long way.”



“Seems you Portsiders had lots to talk about. Hope you got through to her. She’s got to accept being in here.” He sighs. “Burning her mattress makes no sense.”

“A lot of things make no sense,” I say, walking to the door.

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The few people moving through the hospital grounds have their heads bent against the gusting, icy rain. None even gives me a look. At least nature is doing me a big favour. I slowly massage the knots in my neck and shoulders, peering through a window that resembles a waterfall. Then I see Fran running towards me. I push the door open and start the engine.

“Hurry!” I shout, already moving as she jumps in. “How long before they raise the alarm?”

“Ease up, Patsy. Yeh been watchin’ too many cop shows.” She laughs. “No one will follow us. It’ll be a while before they get restless.”

“I hope yer right.” I figure I can be at the ferry in six minutes. Even so, I resist the urge to shoot through the red light at Portland Street. “God, I don’ know why I’m doin’ this.”

“I knew yeh wouldn’ let me down, Patsy.”

“Then yeh knew more than I did,” I snap. “I was jus’ about to drive off when yeh showed.”

“Yeh didn’ do a runner.” She kisses me on the cheek. “I’ll never forget this.”

“Christ, me neither.” I point to a rucksack at her feet. “There’s a one-way ticket an’ some clothes. Takin’ a ferry with no luggage would look suspicious.” She opens her mouth to say something. “Head down!” I hiss. “Police car ahead . . .” But even as I speak the car turns a corner and is gone.

“It’s okay,” Fran says in a soothing voice. “We’re almos’ there.” I pull in close to the ferry pier. “Patsy, I’ll always . . .”

“Go, for fucksake!” I yell, almost pushing her out of the car. “Ferry leaves in a few minutes.” She shakes her head and jumps out. I see her wave at me though my rear mirror. I wave back and speed off.

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Dear Patsy,

I bet you're surprised to hear from me. A woman I met in a church here is helping me write this. First, I saw Tara. I didn't talk to her, just watched as she played with pals in her schoolyard. She looks very happy. I hope that favor you did for me didn't cause you big trouble? I want you to know that I'm happy now. I'll take a walk down by the docks soon. It's Easter Monday and very warm for April. I'm thinking how nice a long swim in cool water would feel today. I've always loved swimming ever since you taught me all those years ago. Thanks again for all you did. Take good care of yourself.

Love, Fran.

It's been over a year since I got that letter. Not one word, good or bad, since. I fold the note and put it inside an old book, *Selected Readings*, by the American Quaker Rufus Jones. Tonight I'm reading my favourite chapter, "The Challenge of the Closed Door."

Some things are finished and final. You cannot change atoms . . . nor perhaps the moral structure of the universe, nor the emergence of mutations. There is no open door to our new world order. We must face the challenge of the closed door.

I looked up "mutation" in a dictionary the first time I read that. It gave me two words, both nouns: change and deviation. I prefer change. Deviation is too much like a word Father Burke uses a lot: "deviant." The priest is being ever so nice to me lately. He drops in to visit occasionally. He seems more at ease around me, as if he's finally found a peg to hang me on. Sometimes he rambles about how temptation can overcome the best of us. Still, he sees that I get extra things such as books and cigarettes.

It'll be lights out soon. I'll look out my cell window for a while before darkness closes in. I grip the steel bars located two feet above my head and pull myself up. I see ducks and mallards dart in and out of the rushes. My arms ache until I have to let go. I tell myself it won't be long now until my time is served. First thing I'll do is walk home by way of the canal. I'll cut down by Croke Park and soon be home in Portside. Only 36 more days to go until the door opens. Make that 35 days come midnight.