

# Stormy Passage

**Mairi Neil**

Sofi winced as the water dribbled through Tamim's cracked and bleeding lips. A slight flicker of eyelids the only indication it had trickled past his swollen tongue. She returned the weak squeeze of the hand she held and moved to the next wasted body to continue gentle ministrations, despairing at her own limitations while continuing to whisper a prayer here, a word of encouragement there, and marvel at human tenacity.

The hunger strikers had sold everything, or borrowed money, to pay for their passage from Afghanistan to a new life in Australia. Shipwrecked, they were rescued from certain death, only to be imprisoned in this detention centre. One nightmare exchanged for another. Months of frustrating confinement with no decision on their release, spawned the protest.

After fleeing political persecution, despondency etched each face with the pain of the deceived and the desperate. In Afghanistan women suffered stoning, disfigurement, or rape for adopting Western dress and Western ideas. Despised and punished by the new fundamentalist Islamic government and forced to don the all-enveloping burqa many stayed indoors unless accompanied by a chaperone. Australia had represented freedom.

Now Sofi ached to join the hunger strikers. She had no one left to grieve and no one to grieve for her. She rubbed her distended belly. The baby had moved—a strong kick, almost a somersault—reminding her of its presence. An afternoon of beatings and rape by a fellow teacher angered at her refusal to stop teaching had left her pregnant. His connections to the Taliban Government ensured her family's elimination. Tears gathered at the corner of almond eyes. Martyrdom would give purpose to her existence.

She stared out of the window to watch the children tie five red ribbons to the cyclone fence, adding to the 275 already there. Day 56, the men

close to death yet the ribbons, fanned by the hot wind, fluttered like pennants. Some strands escaped to the other side of the wire. Sofi closed her eyes imagining she too could slip through the fence to freedom. She caressed her swollen abdomen and twisted thin lips into a sardonic smile.

Rubber-soled shoes squeaked and Nurse Eileen O'Reilly's soft lilt floated across the room. 'It's going to be another scorcher today, Sofi and you could go into labour any time now,' she drew abreast of her charge. 'You must rest. Conserve your energy. Let someone else keep vigil here.'

Sofi smiled a welcome but her moist brown eyes begged for understanding. 'It is my duty,' she waved a delicate hand in the direction of five hospital beds containing her countrymen, 'I feel guilty—I should be lying there.'

Eileen recalled the ten IRA prisoners who died in Long Kesh during the summer of 1981. What had their hunger strike achieved for Ireland? Reconciliation still a dream twenty years later and the Republican cause stagnant. Vivid blue eyes flashed as she said, 'Not at all lass. Your committee made a wise decision. There is no way you would have lasted this long.' She draped a protective arm around Sofi's slender shoulders. 'And that wee one inside you would have died in no time at all.'

'Perhaps you are right but maybe my death, or the death of this child could melt the hearts of the people who keep us here.' Sofi reduced her voice to a whisper. 'Perhaps these poor men would now be starting a new life—instead of dying—in this room.'

Anger stained Eileen's face, her voice harsh. 'Oh, Sofi, sure the people who keep you here have no hearts at all—the fires of hell won't change them!' Guiding the young woman from the window, she added, 'but I pray to God every night that someone will come to their senses and release you all!'

The polished linoleum complained again as Eileen led Sofi across the floor to an armchair near the door. She lowered her voice, breath tickling Sofi's ear, 'apparently someone leaked information to an international journalist who has been most persistent in breaking the story to a host of his contacts here and overseas.' She gripped Sofi's shoulders. 'Your dream of freedom may just happen after all—now wouldn't that be a lovely Christmas present?'

Sofi turned her head to stare into Eileen's eyes. She noticed a twinkle then a definite wink when the nurse added, 'the reporter works for The Belfast Herald, I believe.'

Sofi was digesting Eileen's news when a flustered young man in a royal blue uniform catapulted into the room—his words lost in a jumble of gasps and clattering feet. At the stunned silence, he spoke again with increased volume.

'Didn't you hear me, Eileen? The Superintendent wants you straight away. Come on.'

'Hush, you idjit—have you no respect?' Eileen pointed to the listless forms lying shrouded in white sheets. 'These people are ill for God's sake.' The nurse walked towards the newcomer.

'Now if you can explain in the Queen's English, Darren...'

'That's very funny coming from an Irish Republican...'

'An Australian citizen who has been neutralised Darren...'

'I think naturalised is the word you're looking for Eileen...'

'No, Darren, like an uprooted tree some of me was left in the old country when new roots

were put down here.' Eileen waved her arms for emphasis. 'I love Australia but I'm still attached to Ireland—I have been neutralised!'

Sofi nodded in understanding and suppressed a chuckle when Darren threw up his arms in mock surrender and bristled. 'Whatever you are, the Super has called an urgent meeting of all staff. The shit... pardon my language...' Darren paused to proffer a deferential nod in Sofi's

direction before continuing in an aggrieved voice, ‘the shit has well and truly hit the fan. We have to open up the Detention Centre.’

Eileen’s calm acceptance not what he expected, Darren spoke louder, rushing his sentences.

‘A film crew wants to come into the hospital, plus a delegation from Amnesty International, several politicians from Canberra—maybe even diplomats and ambassadors.’ He wrung his hands, ‘honestly, Eileen, we’ll have more visitors than detainees.’ Pudgy hands raked gelled hair; ‘God knows where we’ll put them all... and now the Sudanese are thinking of going on a hunger strike, if we don’t let everyone mix together like before.’

Sofi gasped. Nurse O’Reilly said, ‘the Sudanese will hunger strike?’

Darren shrugged. ‘That’s what I was told. Cook’s furious. She ordered a pile of special food to make particular national dishes for Christmas Dinner and now says she could have got away with half a dozen chooks and a six-pack.’

Sofi sighed. ‘Very few of the prisoners here are Christians and Christmas is not a festival we celebrate—even if we felt like it.’

‘What Darren is trying to say,’ said Eileen, ‘is that Christmas is a special time in Australia—a time of peace and goodwill as we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.’ She paused searching for words. ‘The staff traditionally get a special meal and Chef planned to give inmates a special meal as a treat but if more people go on a hunger strike few staff will feel like eating!’

Darren pointed towards the window. ‘Oh, my God, they’re here. Look! Come on, Eileen, the Super will be having kittens.’ A reluctant Eileen dragged from the room, Sofi waddled over to the window to watch the media gather outside the fence. She pondered the significance of baby cats and how different Darren and Eileen behaved despite cultural similarities. What did the future hold for the child she carried... for herself?

Outside, flashlights exploded. Video cameras traced the waving ribbons and the antics of curious children. Journalists knelt in the dust to beg children come closer. A couple of Darren's cohorts ran towards the melee flapping arms like alarmed pelicans. Chocolate bars and lollipops passed through the wire ensuring the children ignored guard histrionics. Second thoughts or stage fright made the uniforms retreat.

Sofi's smile froze as a sharp stabbing pain stung her lower back. Panting, she fell forward gripping the grill on the window. She grimaced as another labour pain wracked her abdomen. The telephoto lens of a television camera captured her agony before she struggled into the corridor seeking help.

Nurse O'Reilly, returning with the duty doctor for their regular check of the hunger strikers, intercepted Sofi. Dr. James Matheson continued on his round while Eileen supported a distraught Sofi to the room prepared as a birthing centre.

The Superintendent hovered nearby when the doctor rejoined them. Dr. Matheson exploded, 'expect a bloody awful Christmas! I doubt if young Tamim in bed four will see the night out.'

The Superintendent shrivelled, 'please don't say that.'

Matheson raised his palms heavenwards in a gesture of defeat; his shoulders drooped. The Superintendent, speaking through partly clenched teeth also begged the ceiling for an answer. 'Please don't let him die in front of the world's cameras when those bloody pests swarm in at 4.00 o'clock.' He faced Matheson. 'Can you make sure we have a healthy baby to present to deflect any bad publicity?'

The instruments Eileen held clattered onto a metal trolley. 'This baby will come when it's ready and we'll be doing everything in our power to ensure a healthy mother too!' She tempered her tone. 'Sir, if you call the Agency perhaps we can also keep Tamim alive.'

Sofi gripped the bedstead, murmured in Afghani, before producing a long moan punctuated by a sob. Eileen and Matheson rushed to her

assistance, unsure whether her outburst a reaction to the news of Tamim, or a stage in labour.

The superintendent muttered, 'why me,' and gesticulated to the heavens before striding down the corridor. He avoided even a glance into the room where the incessant whir of ceiling fans drowned the shallow breathing of five emaciated men.

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*The fury of the storm and the huge forty-five foot wall of water that raced towards the ship took Sofi by surprise. When ship and water collided, porthole glass shattered and wooden deck rails splintered. The sea grabbed and gobbled. Long fingers of freezing cold waves gushed and spurted into every corner seeking fodder. Spume cascaded below deck like rippled sheets as the converted trawler crashed onto a reef in the Indian Ocean with a discordant bone-crunching jolt. The violent sea symphony deposited sobbing and silent wreckage onto jagged outcrops of reef like scattered beads from a broken necklace.*

*The seventy passengers battled their formidable foe but what did city dwellers know of the vagaries of the sea? And such an angry sea. Five Indonesian crew aboard the Liberian registered vessel warned the passengers to prepare for rough seas, but even these fishermen had been terrified by the unexpected ferocity of the gale lashing and buffeting the ageing trawler. They had experienced tropical turbulence but not a full-blown cyclone. The Captain and First Officer controlled the destiny of all on board and promised this trip would make the crew rich men.*

*Sofi stared at the bedraggled survivors, only half the passengers managed to cheat the pounding seas threatening oblivion. She wondered aloud why Allah sent yet another obstacle testing her faith, although she thanked Him profusely for helping her to reach the safety of the reef. Several people clinging to the large atolls lacked the strength to withstand the constant battering of breakers and the irritation of salt spray and foam. They disappeared — sucked into the mounting swell like their transport to freedom.*

*Captain and some crew huddled nearby, mirroring the shock of other survivors. A howling wind whisked all words away and with a thunderous roar, the ocean pummelled shivering forms... Sofi screamed in despair.*

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Eileen remained calm but raised her voice as she adjusted the mask on Sofi's face. 'Easy, Sofi, remember breathe in, breathe out... in, out; nice and steady... nice and steady.'

James Matheson's voice had a desperate edge, 'a breech, Nurse. Give her more Pethidine and I'll try to turn it. She has to stop thrashing about. Calm her.'

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*Sofi didn't expect any help. The Afghans were cargo, picked up from a small fishing port on the Indonesian Archipelago, to be dropped a week later at a designated point on the Western Australian coastline. They had brought their own food; the crew supplied fresh water. Minimum explanation, no common language, the crew spoke Indonesian; the Captain's command of English limited. Commonality was money — 3,000 American dollars each – an expensive ticket to freedom.*

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Day stretched into night. Why did Allah make her suffer so? Sofi begged Eileen for relief, wanted sleep...

*Scared to close her eyes and be lost in the endless swirling waters, Sofi crouched limpet-like, praying that the next onslaught did not drag her from the perilous perch. Salt spray stung grazed skin, parched her throat. Eyes and ears ached from the constant growl of the whipping wind and the tumultuous swell beyond the rocks. She focused on maintaining a hold on the slippery sanctuary but could feel her strength dissipating. Sea and sky merged to a mass of indistinguishable grey.*

Eileen encouraged and soothed. 'Just hang in there... that's it Sofi. Hold on, lass, hold on. Don't push yet... wait ... I'll tell you when to push.'

*Almost unconscious Sofi felt the strong arms of a young naval rating pluck her from the rock, and drag her into the inflatable rescue craft. He manoeuvred around the serrated obstacle course, the soothing resonance of his gentle voice comforting. Hauled aboard a much larger ship, Sofi joined other survivors to be overwhelmed by the din of hysterical babbling and the persistent questioning of rescuers.*

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'What in God's name is that racket?' James Matheson's staccato outburst struck a white-coated Darren sliding into the room like a nervous student. 'And what the hell are you doing dressed as an escapee from a paint commercial?'

Darren stuttered, 'It's the Superintendent... no, no... it's, it's... the media. I mean, it's the Superintendent AND the media.' He blushed. 'The coat is a disguise. We're trying to play down the security bit, make the place look less like a prison - you know what I mean?' His face glowed crimson under Matheson's glare. 'I've been sent to ask you, um, warn you that Tamim is in a bad way and could you come at once...'

Eileen snapped. 'All of those poor men are in a bad way...' Her voice faltered, fury draining her cheeks of colour, 'we're trying to make sure there'll be another birth to celebrate tomorrow. Why didn't the Superintendent get help from the Agency when I asked?'

Darren blanched. 'It's been a madhouse. The press has been asking everybody questions— even the children—they've been filming everywhere.' Grey eyes darted to the doorway. 'And the phone calls— constant ringing—desk phones, wall phones, mobile phones—every man and his camera has a mobile phone. It's been hours yet nobody's leaving.' Darren rolled his eyes. 'Funny that... people stuck here are dying to leave and these guys can leave, but won't!'



Eileen hissed through gritted teeth. ‘Please, no pathetic attempt at humour today, Darren.’

‘No,’ said Matheson, ‘just get that circus away and tell the Superintendent I can't be in two places at once. Perhaps the Super can explain to the media about Sofi.’

‘They already know about Sofi - that's why they're clamouring in the corridor.’ Darren’s eyes swivelled back to the doorway as if expecting an invasion.

Nurse and doctor stared at Darren and spoke as one. ‘What?’

Darren puffed his chest pleased to have their undivided attention. ‘They have this picture of Sofi pressed against the window bars. They must have taken it this morning. Anyway, she looks in terrible pain—as if being tortured. Of course, when they found out that she was actually in labour, well—you know—it's Christmas Eve for God's sake.’ Darren beamed as if announcing a Tattslotto winner. ‘What a story!’

Doctor Matheson brushed a hand over weary eyes and shook his head. ‘Yes, the kind of story to smother debate on the proper treatment of all refugees.’

Darren flinched at Eileen's sarcastic, ‘Amen.’ He stumbled as he backed out of the room to find the Superintendent.

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*The barrenness of the landscape and the utilitarian bleakness of the detention centre shocked Sofi. She lay silent for days, swaddled in crisp white sheets, fighting waves of nausea that confirmed her deepest fear. Marvelling that the unwanted life thrived inside her battered body, she became withdrawn and sullen, convinced there was no purpose to living. Relief from mental anguish came when she confided in the persistent and kindly Nurse O'Reilly. Providing friendship and hope, the nurse made Sofi's recovery of body and mind, her mission.*

Eileen said, 'You're doing well, Sofi. Not long now, the worst is over. The baby will be here soon. Listen to me, Sofi... push when I tell you... Push, Sofi, push!'

Sofi wanted the pain to be over... wanted out of this room...wanted out of the detention centre... wanted freedom. Every muscle stretched and screamed.

A few minutes after midnight, Doctor James Matheson smiled for the first time since entering the makeshift birthing room. He helped Eileen place a crying baby to Sofi's breast. Tenderness and exhaustion made his voice almost inaudible, 'Happy Christmas, Sofi, you have a daughter.'

Eileen added, 'a brand new Australian.'