

### **Third prize: First Interview With Inge Morton, Frances Hurd (Havant, England)**

From the day it was known to be him, I feel sometimes, often, as though I am the bad one – *you bad mother, you, you let your son grow up to do these bad things*. I want to say to you that bad things happened to him, to us. So, yes, I am willing to talk to you, I want someone to understand. May I smoke? Is that permitted? Thank you. Let us begin.

I was seventeen years old when I met my husband. It was a good job, to work in the NAAFI. You had to have good English, clean fingernails, be polite and well brought up. We girls, we all slept on the site, four to a bedroom. I don't know what it was like at other bases, I only ever worked at that one, but for me it was like becoming a nun. Yes, truly, our supervisor, he was more strict than my parents ever were. I remember he told my mother, your daughter will be safe with me, I will look after her, and he did, he was very careful, watched us when we were off duty and all the rest of it. What he could not control was the men we served.

My husband, the man who became my husband, he was not a bad man, you understand. There are a lot of men like him, I think, who are happy in armies, in the company of men. He had been in the army since the youngest he possibly could be to join. He had no family. And now he looked around and saw that he needed to have something that was his. Oh, I did not see any of this at the time. He was thirty-five, I was seventeen. I was a child, younger than girls are today, younger even than my own younger sister. Marta looked at me and laughed, she thought I was stupid and innocent. Yes. Innocence was a stupidity.

I had four children by the time I was twenty, Johnny first and then the twins, Andrew and Kevin, and then Matthew. As soon as I had one child out of me my husband put another one in. Every time I had a big stomach his mates slapped his back and praised him and he was so happy. Oh yes, he could fire his bullets and every one hit that target between my legs, and all of them made boys. He was so happy about that, so happy. And I prayed for a girl, one girl. One child who would be mine.

Marta came to see me, she had those thin tights on, I remember, like bare legs. She had a little green dress and pretty hair and I sat there and cried and cried, with all those children crying around me. And she told me I must get the pill, and that she would come with me, help me get it. He never knew, no, I was very careful. He never knew why there were no more children. He would have gone on – I don't know, for ever -- doing this clever trick of making little boys shoot out of my body. I still thought of my daughter, how I would love her, but I knew I could never make a girl with him.

So. There we were, and all the soldiers' wives were English except me and one other. You smile so hard to show you are friendly it makes your face ache. And did they smile back? No, they did not. I was lost in my own country. Then we came to England, and I have been lost here ever since.

Of course it made a big difference to be German, how can you ask me that question? Even now everyone thinks I wear jackboots, that my father was a concentration camp guard, that we shit on the Jews. All that, seventy years later. My grandfather was a peasant, a countryman. He did nothing in the war. I wish I could tell you something bad and then say sorry, sorry, but he did *nothing*. When my father grew up he left the land,

he got a job at the railway station, a little money, a flat to live in. A good wife, two daughters, two sons, everything anyone could need. My father was a lucky man.

My husband was not lucky. After Germany he went to Ireland. He had been there before, he liked, oh, so much, to be a real soldier and do real fighting. If he had died there he would have died happy. But he was not so lucky. He was shot through the chest, and so he lost all he had, his friends and his job and the way people treated him. There was not much help for him and he began to sink, to lose hope. It is like an enchantment, the army. Some men will only be happy when they have it around them.

So, now he was sad and angry and it was hard for him to do sex with me, it hurt his chest, so he began to hit me with his belt. He called me 'German whore, dirty German bitch'. We were alone, we were out of the army. We were living in Darlington – do you know Darlington? It was where he was born but he had been away so long, people could understand me better than him! He was upset by that. It was another reason to hit me.

I need another cigarette, please, and a glass of water.

So. In the end, he gets a piece of tube and fastens it to the back of the car, puts the gas through to the inside and kills himself. I used that car to take the boys to school, to go shopping. Now it was filled with his death. I stood there and that was the first thing I thought, I have lost the car. You could see the gas against the windows inside. He should have died when he was shot. Everyone would have been happier. Perhaps I would not be sitting here now, eh?

I would like a break now, please.

Matthew was so small when his father died, he had no memories of him. Thank God for that, I think. When he was nine months old, his father nearly killed him. I came in the house and I was late, and he was shouting to me to look up. He is with the baby. Holding him over the stairs, by his nappy. I stand there and I beg him, I go on my knees, begging him to put the baby down. I was late from work, we needed the money, you know that was the hardest thing, we needed my money but he was so angry, so angry I could get work and he could not. And he said come up here, you German bitch, come on up here.

No, I do have to tell you. You have to hear it. I have to say it out loud, to be rid of it. I don't care if you don't want to hear it.

Go on all fours, you bitch, he said. Bark, bark, you're just a dog. And then he – but he had put the baby down, so I didn't care. The baby was safe, he was on the landing, he was crying, but not hurt, just cold and hungry. I knew if I could keep my husband busy, one of the boys would creep out, come and get Matthew. Yes, any one of them, even Johnny. And I had to keep barking, make dog noises. Pretend. While he – but you know what he did. He had bought me a collar, a collar and lead. He beat me with the lead, made me wear the collar. While he was – but you know what he did.

To say I hated him is not big enough. I was *made* of hatred for him. There was nothing in my life but hating, and staying alive, and keeping the children safe from him. I would wake up in the morning beside him and think, I will look round, perhaps he has died in the night. I think of putting a pillow over his face, killing him, but he is so much bigger. He would stop me, and then he would kill me.

I was so frightened someone would say something, take the children away. One of their teachers, she came to the house, she was saying, there were marks on Kevin's back. No, no, I am saying, he fell off his bike. As if we would ever have things like that. They had nothing, no toys in their rooms. They were like cells, he locked them in as he locked me in. He goes to them to hit them, he comes to me to rape me. It is still rape if you are married, I know that now. Not then.

Please, write this all down, so that it is written somewhere, it is recorded. He will never be punished now, he took such an easy way out. I thought perhaps the gas, it may have burned him, burned his throat and inside his lungs. Do you know if that is so? I hope that he had some moments of fear and misery.

Yes. Another break now, please. Yes.

Thank you for that, for the good coffee. And the cake, that was a great kindness. Vienna is famous for chocolate cake, for Sacher Torte, but we Germans, we love it too. When I was a child, my grandmother made it once a year, for my father's birthday. Every year we went there, to their house. In my mind it is always summer there, I never saw it in winter. My grandmother made a drink from berries, I do not know the English name. She made one like schnapps for the grown ups, and a soft, little drink for the children. On festival days all the villagers dressed in the old clothes, you know, the jackets and leather shorts for the men, and the girls with tight waistcoats, and the long skirts. My grandmother said her skirt would be mine when I was bigger. I wonder what happened to it, who has it now. Everyone danced together in the square. There was music, from speakers. In the past they had a village orchestra, they had enough people who could play instruments, play together, to do that. But even when we were children, there were no young people living there any more. They came back for the festival, but they lived in Frankfurt and Hamburg, or America even. All that's gone now, I think. No dancing now.

Well. Shall we go on?

When my husband is dead, I want to make life start again, be different. There was some money, life insurance. I think they looked at me a little sideways but I was at work that day, people saw me. Oh, if I could have done it, yes, of course I would, but how could I get him, so big, to sit quietly while I fasten all the tubing? And his fingerprints were everywhere. So, I got the money. And I look at the house, and I think, I shall drive you out of here, make it a new place. Everything is painted white, clean and nice. The locks off the doors. And I bought the children anything, everything. Toys, new clothes, everything. Like their friends.

I tell you one more thing. There was a funeral, the army, they did it. I stood up and sat down when they told me. But after the funeral, they gave me his ashes, in a pot. I put them into plastic bags, little ones, you know, for the freezer. Oh, there were a *lot* of ashes, I had twenty bags, thirty. Then I take them out with me, in my handbag. There are bins for dog stuff, I put them in there. I never tell anybody this till now. Never.

So. He is dead, and I think everything will be better. I have four boys and then three of them -- *three* -- they join the army. I beg them, I say, please don't. I feel my husband is pulling, his hand is on them. He had the hat, the green soldier hat, you know it? I find Johnny, he has it up to his face, he is smelling it. I wanted to be sick. I got matches and

try to burn it but it wouldn't burn, and Johnny found me, he was so angry. Then he hit me, and I know there is no escaping, it is like his father has a new body. He is marching around in Johnny's body.

My little Matthew, he was a cook in the army. I said to him, you can do cooking anywhere, please don't do it there. He laughs, he kisses me. Only four years, he said, good training.

It was a stupid death, not war at all. Matthew comes off shift at night, not thinking, walks in front of a car. Bang, my son is gone. Kevin, ah, Kevin, that was not, not so simple. He was in Afghanistan. They are, you know, walking, looking around -- *die streise*, I forget the word in English -- patrol, yes, that's it. They get caught, cut off. They don't get rescued, I mean not quick enough. When they find them, they were all dead and they had been cut about. Their, you know, their private bits.

Yes, please. A break now.

I don't see Johnny any more, I mean, after Kevin was killed I don't see him. Then the police are on my doorstep and they are saying, come, you must come now. My son Andy in Southampton, they take him too, they keep us away from our homes. They say that because of what Johnny has done, there will be people who want to kill us. On and on it goes, yes? One death makes another.

I think of him at that school. The children see Johnny, the teachers, they see him running across the playing field, and they know he is bad, they see death coming. They call the children inside, they lock the doors and pull the blinds down, they hide under the tables. I think of him walking round the building, I think of him firing through the windows and hearing the screaming.

I am his mother. I have to think of him doing this, to know that my son did it.

And then at the end, he stands in the playground and puts the gun in his mouth, pulls the trigger one more time. Like his father, you see. Selfish. Look at me, I hurt, so I hurt others, then I run away into death.

I shall kill myself with cigarettes in the end, I think. You know that first instant, the first time with a new cigarette as you pull it in and it hits the back of your nose, the back of your throat ... just for that instant, I think I have another life, something floating in the air, maybe, like the cigarette smoke. No people. Yes, no people. Just smoke, floating.