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Bit of a Bombshell

by Chris Baker

At 06:15 to be precise. No one rings the bell at that time. I knew who it was. The Casualty Notification Officer. We'd dreaded, absolutely dreaded it – every day, every single day. He'd nominated me as NOK: he told me just before he left this time.

“Hello, I am Jane Yolland. I have some news of Edward, may I could come in?” she said quietly. “Yes, yes of course,” numbed, knowing what was to come.

“I am so, so very sorry to have to tell you that your son died this morning. It was a car bomb.”

I slumped into a chair and looked into the garden where he had played as a small boy. “I cannot begin to understand your misery,” she said.

Nothing can prepare you for news like that, you might think it could, but it can't. It simply can't. Never.

We sat there in silence for a little while, probably quite a while as I tried to take it in, and couldn't. The clock in the hall ticking, ticking, ticking, it went on and on and on but time was frozen, solid.

I wanted to say something but couldn't - not to begin with at least. It was so hard, no impossible to take in.

I thought of his mother. It would have destroyed her, simply destroyed her.

“A day never went by without it worrying us; his mother especially. She'd hated it and could never speak about it, not without becoming very distressed.”

“Why does he have to do this?” she used to ask over and over again. To which there wasn’t an answer.

Jane looked so young. “You aren’t old enough to remember the excitement of the Falklands.” I said “His mother had been abroad then – it was before we’d even met, travelling in Africa, out of touch with what was happening at home. Came back. She couldn’t understand what had got into the country.”

“He was our only son you know.” I said rather lamely, as I came to think of it. “He was an awful baby, crying all the time: inconsolable for hours. It was a torment. The complete opposite of his elder sister: for a more placid baby one could not wish. As he grew up he got better and better.”

“He was 26, wasn’t he” said Jane. I don’t know what made me tell her. I just needed to say something and once I began, I could not stop.

“His mother took him out of school when he was five: too disruptive – half the class wanted to sit around him. He was to have to stand in the corridor during all lessons. He was so very determined but frustrated. Dyslectic, you know. Lessons were a trial for him. Had to have two eye operations before he was seven, to correct a weak muscle. His mother was very good with him. Actually, she was bloody excellent and luckily for him and I think that he knew it, more determined.”

We’d sent him to a girls’ school that took boys until the age of eight.

“Gradually, he calmed down.”

“He was very good at sport – team games, especially rugger, fantastic hand/eye co-ordination. At twelve and a half he was third in the Under 13 national fencing finals. At 15 he was in the under-18 school rugby finals at Twickenham. He was so modest about it and we were so proud.”

“How far away it all suddenly now seems.” Suddenly, quite literally a life-time away.

“He was Captain of the First XV, of Hockey, of Swimming, of Water-Polo – with feet the size of his – could he move - like a fish. And finally Head of School. He was kind and popular. And he managed to get Latin GCSE, a bit of a triumph for a boy predicted to get few, if any GCSEs.

He was set on a gap year commission with the Coldstream Guards. There were eighty of them from all over the `UK. Eight weeks at Sandhurst, run to exhaustion by a S/Sgt. from 3 Para and then a year with the First Battalion.

We feared then he would love it and he did. Like a duck and water. He was really good with the guardsmen. He never took up his place at medical school.

At the end of the year he went back to Sandhurst and became a regular soldier.
Nulli Secundus.

“Can you, should you stop your children from following their chosen career? Isn't that why we educate them? Informed choice. Some choice. Why him? Why him?”

He said you must go on if anything should happen. But how? It seemed insurmountable. Jane couldn't stay; she'd sat with me for I don't know how long. After she'd gone, I went into the garden and began to dig.