

Benefit

by Ivor John

Sitting in the waiting room, looking around at the others there, most waiting to speak to bored looking civil servants about their benefit claims. There were six desks behind a counter which ran the length of the room. Screens went nearly to the ceiling. Two of the conditions were occupied, by bored looking girls who were chatting between themselves and laughing, between claimants walking up to the counter to be told to sit in the waiting room

A young woman no older than early twenties was chatting with the girl next to her, while a young boy, wearing pyjamas clung to her leg, seemingly trying to hide behind her. Another woman, probably in her fifties, seated near me, rummaged around in a large canvas shopping bag before pulling out a sausage roll in plastic packaging.

“I’ve been here two hours already,” she said, between mouthfuls of sausage roll.

“They are fucking useless, they sanctioned my benefit because I went on a bloody holiday. I don’t know how they expect me to live on fuck all,” she continued.

Her manner suggested that she had thought I was someone she could chat to. I tried to answer politely without encouraging conversation. The best I could manage was, “I know, it’s dreadful.”

She seemed to pick up on my indifference, and didn’t pursue our conversation. Taking a large bit of sausage roll she picked up a magazine from the low table.

“Ian Reynolds, Ian Reynolds,” a young civil servant shouted, above the noise in the crowded waiting room. He couldn’t have been more than nineteen or twenty. Holding a clipboard and some forms I could picture him in a university refectory but not interviewing me about my finances. I felt slightly reassured as I stood up and walked toward the nondescript wooden door, almost unnoticed beside the row of screens. He nodded as I caught his eye, waving the papers toward the door to indicate I should go through.

He walked quickly along a short corridor, talking over his shoulder, “how was your journey in Ian? Have you had to come far?”

He neither wanted or expected any reply. He would know exactly how far my journey had been. I had been sent a standard form a few weeks ago. The same form they sent periodically in which I would be asked to state any income during the current period of benefit claim. Out of habit as much as anything, I had ticked none, which almost was true. I wondered if this was connected to the request to have an interview with Mr Glavin at the benefit office. The last time this happened, was just over a year ago, when I had been interrogated about my fitness to return to work. The letter, which I had bought with me from my consultant psychiatrist, hadn't seemed to reassure him much that I was unfit to work. I had assumed this meeting would be the same, and I had requested another letter, to explain my diagnosis.

"Take a seat Ian."

We were in a small interview room. Just a desk with two chairs on each side. A pile of forms which looked to be odds and ends left over from previous interviews. On a noticeboard behind the desk were stapled a variety of faded memos and a notice in bold red font:

'WE WILL NOT TOLERATE PHYSICAL OR VERBAL ABUSE TOWARDS OUR STAFF'

He pulled his chair toward the desk and put the papers down in front of him.

"This is a routine follow up to your benefit claim Ian, it is three years now isn't it since you last worked. Is that correct?"

I confirmed what he said and he wrote enthusiastically on a checklist in front of him.

"So that is correct?" he repeated.

"Yes, I am signed off. I have asked for a letter from my doctor, it didn't come in time for me to bring it."

"Don't worry, that's fine Ian, if you could just sign this form, I can contact your doctor to check that. So other than benefit payments, let's see, universal credit including health payments, rent payments and your disability subsidy. Is that right?"

I knew right away, that they knew something, his interrogation was so clumsy. I tried to think, should I admit to having forgotten? I couldn't I would be sanctioned. I was in the middle, before I had begun my reply.

"Yes, that's right, I can't work, I am not able to"

"OK Ian, thank you"

He took a folder out, from his papers from which he produced some photographs.

"Perhaps you could explain these pictures?"