



JIMMY BRESLIN

He's Never Been In Northern Ireland

"Who are they?" the sister was saying at the door, the three children she was minding looking out the windows of the house in Williston Park. "Who are they to be runnin' this country from 10 Downing St.? A shower of bastards, all of them. Take a family man out of this house and put him in jail in Texas because the British ask for it. Oh, a shower of bastards. She's up at the beauty parlor. She has a rally at Gaelic Park today. The FBI, they're fine, aren't they now? She's to be at the AO Haytch Hall in Babylon tomorrow."

The beauty parlor was four blocks away. The sister, Mrs. Thomas Laffey, Eileen, had her head thrown back in a sink while a girl washed it. "I'll visit with you next door for a cup of coffee in 10 minutes," Eileen Laffey said. "I've to be at Gaelic Park today and the AO Haytch tomorrow. Oh, you know? They're raisin' money for the families. With my Tommy in jail we're barely gettin' by, me and the children."

I went next door and waited. There arrived one day last June at the house of Thomas Laffey of Williston Park, Long Island, a subpoena calling on him to appear before a federal grand jury in Fort Worth, Tex. The grand jury was investigating a possible purchase of arms in Texas which found their way to Northern Ireland. Ordinarily in Texas the only crime in owning a gun is having one that doesn't work. See Lee Oswald. People in the U.S. Attorney's office in Fort Worth said at first that they were handling the case because the

British had requested it of the Justice Department in Washington. Then they started to deny it. Laffey and four others, members of a small committee of Irish-Americans in New York known as Northern Aid, refused to answer questions. Laffey, a citizen and Army veteran, was put in jail in Fort Worth on June 23. Held on civil contempt, he could be in jail until November of 1973. His attorney, Frank Durkan, says, "The man is a political prisoner, but he isn't even a political prisoner of his own country. The Justice Department is doing a favor for the British."

Eileen Laffey, hair in rollers, came into the candy store for coffee. "Texas is two per cent Catholic, that's why they put it down there," she said. "Who can be goin' that far to demonstrate? My Tommy just sits in jail to please the British. I was born in County Mayo. Tommy's from Galway. He came here in 1957, I came here in 1958. We met at the Jaegar House. Tommy served in the Army two years. He's been a citizen a year and a half. What does he get for it? He's allowed to call me every Sunday morning."

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She took out a letter he had sent from jail asking for help from politicians. The wording seemed to be in the best traditions of Irish jail writers. It said, "We who in most un-American fashion have been torn from our wives, children, families, neighborhoods and our livelihoods, are in jail without charge or trial on the flimsiest contempt charge."

"Tommy has been a real estate salesman. Good he was, otherwise I'd be starvin' right now. We ran three dances for the Northern Aid Committee. They keep saying to us, 'You must have connections in Northern Ireland. Who are they?' Do you know that I've never been to Northern Ireland in my life? Neither has Tommy. That's what they don't understand. Nobody from the South in Ireland ever goes to the North. I been in lousy London for a year. I hate to say it now, but I was. Never in Northern Ireland. I don't even know anybody from there. We just ran these dances and the FBI started comin' around, a favor to the British."

Big arms shipments the British complain of are contained only in songs on juke boxes. Perhaps 250 gunmen tie up Northern Ireland. Anything they require is either bought or stolen from British soldiers, many of whom are Irish, or arrives in the country casually.

On one recent flight from New York, a Bronx saloonkeeper dropped into the seat next to me with a loud clank. He began buying cans of beer three at a clip, from the stewardess. About an hour out of Boston his kidney started to go. He began running his hand over his face. "How long will it be?" he said. "Four

hours," he was told.

"Christ, I'll die," he said.

"Well, get up and use the lavatory."

He shook his head. "They got a gun strapped to the front of me, and I can't open my effin' pants."

Knowledge of the situation only underscores the outrage of the Justice Department action. The ease with which Laffey and the four others were placed in jail appears to be a natural product of an organization which gets involved in ITT scandals while at the same time placing 300 FBI agents on the trail of the Berrigan brothers.

Durkan, Laffey's lawyer, said yesterday, "I get to Fort Worth and the government says, 'Oh, we'll give your fellows complete immunity.' I asked them about a chance for these people being extradited to England on some trumped-up charges. The government says, 'Oh there's no substantial risk of that.' Well, to me 'no substantial' means there is risk. I told my people to say nothing. I don't trust the American government."

Over her coffee yesterday, Eileen Laffey said, "At least if they told us how long they'd be in there, we could start to arrange our lives. I've the children askin' me every day. What can we do? They're terrible, the government is." □