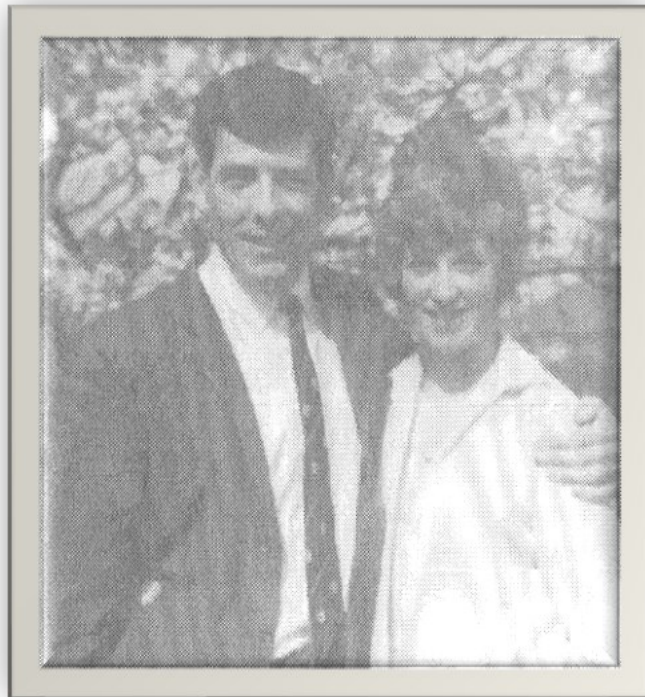




Terror Comes Closeⁱ

Elizabeth and Benjamin Forde

*At times I feel my faith begin to waver,
When up ahead I see a chasm wide;
It's then I turn and look up to my Saviour,
I am strong when He is by my side.*



Benjamin and Elizabeth Forde as a young couple.

As the cancer of violence spread throughout the body of our land, so my field of operations widened. As the terrorist moved farther afield to commit his outrage, so the detective had to travel. Sometimes the distance meant being away from home overnight, or if the inquiries demanded it, a stay of two or three days would be necessary.

One time I was down in Ballymena, county Antrim, investigating the murder of a man who had been burned to death during a series of bombs attacks on Ballymena's shopping centre. On the last day I was there, bombs were planted in another shopping area in Dunmurry, West Belfast, where we had moved a few months earlier. I heard about it when I got home that evening, for Lily had been there; in fact she had been involved: the terrorists had tried to hi-jack her car for their getaway.

The moment I stepped into the house I knew something was wrong. Lily looked shaken up; there wasn't so much as a hint of her usual smile.

'Lily, are you all right?' I asked.

Tears that had been refused for hours now flowed freely as Lily rushed into my arms.

'Love, what's the matter?'

Clive came running from his room, his eyes wide with excitement.

'Dad, we were held up by some bad men and they tried to steal our car!' he gushed.

I stared at him for a moment while his words sank in.

'We had to go to the police station,' he went on, 'and there were bombs, Dad, and the man had a gun and –'

'Hang on, son,' I said. 'Let Mummy tell me.'

Lily stepped back and took a handkerchief to her eyes. She'd finished with the tears now.

'It's true,' she said, and gave a hearty blow into the handkerchief.

'Look, sit down,' I said, guiding her to the settee. 'Tell me all about it, from the beginning.'

'Well, I picked Clive up from school this afternoon as usual,' she began, regaining her composure, 'and there were a few things I wanted at the shopping centre so we drove in and I parked in the supermarket car park. I'd not even turned off the engine before a man opened the passenger door and got in beside me.'

Anger flared inside me, but I said nothing.

'I knew it was trouble, so I switched off and got out of the car. I don't know what I thought I would do. There was no one about and there was this other man standing there with his hand in his pocket, like he had a gun ...' She looked up at me, a trace of fear in her eyes. 'Oh, Ben, I was so frightened ...'

I sat down beside her and took hold of her hand. 'Go on,' I said gently, hiding my anger. 'What happened next?'

'This other man got into the back seat with Clive and then he told me to get in; that I was to drive them.'

Clive was beside the settee, hopping from one foot to the other, bursting with excitement and reliving the event as Lily described it. To a six-year-old it was all a marvellous adventure. I smiled at him and he came and curled into my lap as Lily went on:

'I took the keys out of the ignition and said I wasn't doing anything until he let Clive out of the car, but he wouldn't, at first. So I just kept on at him to let Clive out and in the end he did. He had to get out himself to let Clive out, and then he snatched the keys and gave them to the other man who had moved across behind the wheel.' She looked at me, calmer now. 'Well, you know how many keys there are on my ring – door keys and church keys and all sorts – and he just couldn't find the right one. He kept saying, "which key? Which key?", but I kept quiet. For a minute, though, I thought Clive was going to tell them –' She looked at him fondly. 'He started to point to the right one, but thank goodness I managed to signal to him to keep quiet. Then suddenly there seemed to be lots of people in the car park, and the men just gave up and ran off. Just after that we heard some bombs go off. They were over in the furniture warehouse. Then the police came ...'

As Lily's voice trailed off, Keri came into the room and rushed over to greet me.

'Daddy,' she said softly, 'some bad men tried to take Mummy and Clive away in our car.'

'I know, sweetheart,' I smiled. 'And both Clive and Mummy were very brave, weren't they.'

Then I turned to Lily and for the first time let my anger show as I said: 'You'd recognise them again, these men?' Cause I'm going to get them, and when I do ...'

I rolled Clive off my lap and got up to go to the hall.

'Ben, where are you going?' Lily asked anxiously. 'Don't do anything silly.'

'I'm going to make a phone call, that's all,' I said. 'Who did you speak to at the station? Who's on the case, do you know?'

'Ben, please – it's being taken care of,' Lily pleaded,

I picked up the phone and dialled the station. Under my breath I said, 'I'll take care of them all right, if I get my hands on them.'

The anger did not last long. There was no point in harbouring hate or malice, it was not possible to confront these men who had threatened the safety of my loved ones. But had they been accessible at that time I realised I would have been tempted to sin. This is natural reaction, of course; it is something that is in all of us. Looking back, I thank God that my

attempts to locate those men were unsuccessful and that I wasn't faced with the temptation to wrong them.

This incident taught me two things. It reminded me very forcefully that I was still a sinner: that although by God's grace I had been saved from the wrath of his judgment, there was another sense in which I was still being saved, for I cannot be perfect that side of heaven. Not that this excuses my deliberate sin; as the apostle Paul writes: 'You can trust God to keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you can't stand up against it ... He will show you how to escape temptation's power'.ⁱⁱ That puts the onus squarely on my shoulders.

The other thing I learned was an insight into how the most loving and responsible people can act out of character and inflict harm or even commit murder. For when violence comes so close, perhaps maiming a loved one, or even taking their life, people can become eaten up with a hatred and bitterness that draws them into taking vengeance, and it is only after committing the deed that many realise how greatly they have acted against their moral principles.

From my own reaction that evening I could see how easily it would be for a man to let his feelings get the better of him. And this seemed to underline the need for every man to hand his life over to God, and to know his power within to resist sin. Even *with* Christ this is sometimes difficult, but always possible; without him all men will fail miserably.

As I thought on these things it was impressed upon me that, as a Christian, the key to resisting temptation and to loving my enemies is found, not in reading the Bible (although it is through God's Word that we learn of his formula for success in these and other areas), but in prayer. If in the Bible we find instruction and direction for life's journey, in prayer we find the provision and the sustenance necessary for the course. Prayer is really feeding on God. Jesus said, 'I am the Bread of Life.'ⁱⁱⁱ As we get to know him through talking to him, being quiet before him and allowing him to talk to us, so he feeds us with himself. There is no hunger of the human soul he cannot satisfy. And there is no need of the human heart he cannot meet. It is because he has met my own need, and abundantly blessed me beyond my hopes and desires, that I can confidently commend Jesus to all – the housewife, the policeman, the terrorist. But without prayer, that two-way, ever open channel of communication with God, this would be a different story.

That night, at the children's bedtime, we knelt as a family and thanked God for keeping us all safe that day, and then we asked that he would speak to the men who had planted the bombs and sought to take Lily's car. It was perhaps the most difficult prayer I had ever prayed, but it was also one of the most necessary.

'Lord,' I continued, 'let them come to know the love of Jesus through the cross.' And then I knew I had forgiven them. For the cross is the great leveller: there we all stand condemned; there we all find pardon.

The spirit of forgiveness is something Lily and I sought to teach Keri and Clive throughout their childhood. One evening we had the satisfaction of realising that the message was getting through. I was kneeling beside Clive as he said his prayers before getting into bed.

He was a little upset, having heard on the news that a policeman had been killed, and in his prayer he told God how he loved his daddy, and that if they ever shot his daddy (I awaited the next remark with great interest) he would like to be shot too, so that he could be with his daddy. There was not so much as a hint of retaliation.

I knew of only one way to bring to an end the centuries-long troubles of Northern Ireland: it was the way of the bended knee, the way of the forgiving spirit, the way of 'bring up a child in the way he should go, and when he is grown he will not depart from it'.^{iv} This was where the battle had to be won, in the home. The choice of war or peace, I believed, was in the hands of every parent in the land. And it was in making the *right* choice that hope would have a chance to take root. Without hope, the future looked bleak indeed.

ⁱ This story is an extract from the book 'Hope – in Bomb City – yesterday today tomorrow', Ben Forde with Chris Spencer (pages 106-111).

ⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 10:13.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 6:35.

^{iv} Proverbs 22:6.