

CROSS

KEN BRUEN



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MINOTAUR BOOKS  NEW YORK

For

David Zeltersman ... True Noir,
Jim Winter ... a Writer of Dark Beauty,
Gerry Hanberry ... the Poet of the Western World

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

[17](#)

[18](#)

[19](#)

[20](#)

[21](#)

[22](#)

[23](#)

[24](#)

[25](#)

[26](#)

[27](#)

[28](#)

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1

'A cross is only agony if you are aware of it.'

Irish saying

It took them a time to crucify the kid. Not that he was giving them any trouble; in fact, he'd been almost cooperative. No, the problem was getting the nails into his palms – they kept hitting bone.

Meanwhile, the kid was muttering something.

The younger one said, 'Whimpering for his mother.'

The girl leaned close and said in a tone of surprise, 'He's praying.'

What was she expecting – a song?

The father lifted the hammer, said, 'It's going to be light soon.'

Sure enough, the first rays of dawn cutting across the small hill, throwing a splatter of light across the figure on the cross, looked almost like care.

'Why aren't you bloody dead?'

How to reply? I wanted to say, 'Tried my level best, really, I wanted to die. Surviving was not my plan, honestly.'

Malachy was my old arch enemy, my nemesis, and, like the best of ancient Irish adversaries, I had even saved his arse once.

He was the heaviest smoker I'd ever met and God knows I've met me share. He now chain-smoked another, growled, 'They shot the wrong fucker.'

Lovely language from a priest, right? But Malachy never followed any clerical rule I'd ever heard of. He meant Cody, a young kid who I saw as my surrogate son and who had taken the bullets meant for me. Even now, he lay in a coma and his chances of survival varied from real low to plain abysmal.

The shooting hadn't helped my limp, the result of a beating with a hurley. I was thus limping along the canal, seeing the ducks but not appreciating them as I once had. Nature no longer held any mercy for me. Heard my name called and there was Father Malachy, the bane of my life. When I ended up trying to help him, was he grateful? Was he fuck. He had the most addictive personality I'd ever met, be it nicotine, cakes, tea or simply aggression, and addictive personalities are my forte. I've always wanted to say *my forte* – gives a hint of learning, but not showy with it. In truth, my forte was booze. He was looking grumpy, shabby and priestly. That is, furtive.

He had greeted me with that crack about being bloody dead and seemed downright angry. He was dressed in the clerical gear: black suit shiny from wear and the pants misshapen, shoes that looked like they'd given ten years' hard service. Dandruff lined his shoulders like a gentle fall of snow.

I said, 'Nice to see you too.' Let a sprinkle of granite leak over the words and kept my eyes fixed on him. He flicked the butt into the water, startling the ducks.

I added, 'Still concerned for the environment?'

His lip curling in distaste, he snapped, 'Is that sarcasm? Don't you try that stuff on me, boyo.'

The summer was nearly done. Already you could feel that hint of the Galway winter bite; soon the evenings would be getting dark earlier, and if I'd only known, darkness of a whole other hue was coming down the pike. But all I heard were the sounds of the college, just a tutorial away from where we stood. Galway is one of those cities where sound carries along the breeze like the faintest whisper of prayers you never said, muted but present.

I turned my attention afresh to Malachy. We were back to our old antagonism, business as usual.

Before I could reply he said, 'I gave the boy the last rites, did you know that? Anointed him with the oils. They thought he was a goner.'

I suppose gratitude was expected, but I went, 'Isn't that, like, your job, ministering to the sick, comforting the dying, stuff like that?'

He gave me the full appraisal, as if I'd somehow tricked him, said, 'You look like death warmed up.'

I turned to go, shot, 'That's a help.'

Fumbling for another cig, he asked, 'Did they find the shooter?'

Good question. Ni Iomaire – in English, Ridge, a female Guard, known as a Ban Gardai – had told me they'd ruled out one of the suspects, a stalker I'd leaned on. He was in Dublin on the day of the shooting. That left a woman, Kate Clare, sister of a suspected priest-killer. I didn't mention her to Ridge. It was complicated: I'd felt responsible for the death of her brother, and if she shot at me, it wasn't all that sure what the hell I wanted to do. She may also have killed others. I'd figured I'd deal with her when I regained my strength.

I said to Malachy, 'No, they ruled out the prime suspect.'

He wasn't satisfied with that. 'So, the person who shot your friend is still out there?'

I didn't want to discuss this, especially not with him, said, 'Not much escapes you.'

Then he abruptly changed tack. 'You ever visit your mother's grave?'

There are many crimes in the Irish lexicon, odd actions that in the UK wouldn't even rate a mention, but here were nigh on unforgivable.

Topping the list are:

Silence or reticence. You've got to be able to chat, preferably incessantly. Making sense isn't even part of the equation.

Not buying a round. You might think no one notices, but they do.

Having notions, ideas above your imagined station.

Neglecting the grave of your family.

There are others, such as having a posh accent, disliking hurling, watching BBC, but they are the second division. There's a way back from them, but the first division, you are fucked.

I tried, 'Believe it or not, when you're visiting a shot boy, shot full of bloody holes, it's harder than you might think to nip out to the cemetery.'

He blew that off, said, 'Tis a thundering disgrace.'

The current national disgrace was the major hospitals admitting they'd been selling the body parts of dead children without the permission of the parents. Even the tax shenanigans of the country's politicians paled in comparison to this. The Government had pledged that *heads would roll* – translated, scapegoats would be found. I'd had enough of Malachy and made to move away.

He asked, 'What do you make of the crucifixion?'

I was lost. Was this some metaphysical query? I went for the stock reply. 'I take it as an article of faith.'

Lame, right?

We'd been walking, walking and sparring, and had reached a shop at the top of the canal. Moved under the store's canopy as drops of rain began to fall.

A man emerged, stopped, pointed at a No Smoking decal, barked, 'Can't you read?'

Malachy rounded on him, went, 'Can't you mind your own business? Fuck off.'

As I said, not your expected religious reply.

The man hesitated then stomped away.

Malachy glared at me, then said, 'When the Prods crucified some poor hooor two years ago, I believed it was just one more variation on the punishment stuff that paramilitaries do, but I thought it was confined to the North.'

I tried for deep, said, 'Nothing is confined to the North.'

He was disgusted, began to walk away and said, 'You're drinking again. Why did I think I could talk sensible to you?'

I watched him amble off, scratching his head, a cloud of light dandruff in his wake. It never occurred to me the horror he'd mentioned would have anything to do with me. Boy, was I wrong about that.

The booze, sure, I was *nearly* drinking again. You get shot at, you're going to have a lot of shots in the aftermath. Course you are. It's cast-iron justification. More and more, I'd begun to re-walk my city. What is it Bruce Springsteen titled his New York, 'My City Of Ruins'? At the back of my mind was the seed of escape, get the hell out, so I'd decided to see my town from the ground down. Ground zero.

I moved from the canal to St Joseph's Church, and a little along that road is what the locals now term Little Africa. A whole area of shops, apartments, businesses run by Nigerians, Ugandan, Zambesians, people from every part of the massive continent. To me, a white Irish Catholic, it was a staggering change, little black kids playing in the streets, drum beats echoing from open windows, and the women were beautiful. I saw dazzling shawls, scarves, dresses of every variety. And friendly ... you smiled at them, they responded with true warmth.

And that, despite the despicable graffiti on the walls:

Non Irish Not Welcome

Irish Nazis ... a shame of epic proportion.

An elderly black man was moving along in front of me and I said, 'How you doing?'

He gave me a look of amazement, then his face lit up and he said, 'I be doing real good, mon. And you, brother, how you be doing?'

I ventured I was doing OK and fuck, it made me whole day. I moved on, a near smile on my own face. Hitting the top of Dominic Street, I turned left and strolled towards the Small Crane.

Isn't that a marvellous name? So evocative, and you just have to ask ... is there a large crane?

No.

Then you hit the pink triangle. I shit thee not. In Galway. A gay ghetto. Me father would turn in his

grave.

Me, I'm delighted.

Keep the city moving, keep it mixed, blended, and just maybe we'll stop killing our own selves over hundreds of years of so-called religious difference.

But I was getting too deep for me own liking, muttered, 'Bit late for you to be getting social/political conscience.'

There's a lesbian bar on the corner and I would have loved me bigoted mother to know that. She have put a match to it and then got a Mass said.

I had quickened my pace, was on Quay Street, the Temple Bar of Galway, smaller but no less riotous, bastion of English hen parties and general mayhem, imported or otherwise. I turned at the flash hotel called Brennan's Yard, where the literati drank.

I had dreaded returning to my apartment. There's a Vince Gill song, 'I Never Knew Lonely'. You live on your own, see a loved one go down, there's few depressions like entering an empty apartment, the silent echoes mocking you. I wanted to roar, 'Honey, I'm home.'

I walked slowly up the stairs of my building, dread in my gut, the keys in my hand. There was a key ring attached, given to me by Cody, it had a Sherlock Holmes figurine. I took a deep breath, turned the key. I'd been to the off-licence, got my back-up.

Bottle of Jameson in my hand, I walked in, found a glass, poured a healthy measure, toasted 'Welcome home, shithead.'

No matter what the cost – and I've paid as dear a price as there is – those first moments when the booze lights your world, there is nothing ... nothing to touch that. Put the cap on the bottle. I was back to the goddamn longing, to trying to keep within a certain level of balance. Shite, I'd been down that road a thousand times, never worked, always ended in disaster. The silence in the room was deafening.

I'd been doing this demented stuff a while now, buying booze, pouring it and then pouring it down the toilet, each time muttering like a befuddled mantra, 'Down the toilet, like my life.'

Before the shooting – What a line that is, a real conversation spinner, beats *Where I took my vacation* hands down – I'd been trying to implement changes, had decided to change the things I could. Got as far as buying a whole new range of music, stuff I'd been reading about for years but never got round to hearing. Picked up a CD by Tom Russell, little realizing the serendipity of one track. The album was titled *Modern Art* and he had a recording of Bukowski's poem 'Crucifix In Death Hand'.

I noticed I had the volume on full and wondered if me hearing was going. I poured the whiskey down the toilet. Once the drink compulsion eased, I looked round my home. Was there a single item that meant anything? The books were lined against the wall, a thin layer of dust on the spines. Like the shadows on my life, the dust had settled slowly and it didn't seem like anyone was going to eradicate it.

2

‘Men are so inevitably mad that not to be mad would be to give a mad twist to madness.’

Pascal, *Pensées*, 412

The girl was humming softly, an old Irish melody she no longer knew the name of. It was her mother's song and sometimes, if the girl turned real quick, she thought she could catch a glimpse of her mother, those blue eyes fixed on something in the distance, her slight figure, like a tiny ballerina, shimmering in the half light of the dying day.

She never told anyone of this, hugged it to herself like the softest fabric, like the piece of Irish linen her mother had put so much value on. It had been brought out on special occasions, handled with loving care and then put away, her mother saying in that soft Irish lilt, ‘This will be yours some day, *alannah*.’

Alannah – my child – the first Irish word that held any real significance for her.

The girl's eyes moved around the room: cheap wallpaper was peeling from the top, a thin strip of carpet barely covered the floor and the windows badly needed to be cleaned. Her mother would never have allowed that, those windows would have been sparkling.

Near the door was the cross, a heavy hand-carved piece, the features of the Christ outlining the torment, the nails clearly visible in the hands and feet. Her mind flashed to that other figure and she lingered on the image for a time. It was burned into her memory like a promise she'd made to her mother, and in her own way she had fulfilled the pledge. There was so much to do yet.

And then she smiled. The mantra her mother had used: ‘So much to do.’

She was maybe six, and her mother had decided to give the house a total clean. ‘Top to bottom.’

For some reason that had struck the child as hilarious, and as she laughed her mother had joined in, the two of them, arms round each other, laughing like they'd won the lottery.

When the laughter had subsided, her mother had looked right into her eyes, asked, ‘Do you know how much I love you?’

And she'd said, to her mother's total delight, ‘Top to bottom.’

The girl felt her eyes begin to fill with tears and she stood up abruptly, began to pace the worn carpet. She focused on what she had to do next, her conviction that not only would it be done but such a way that it would scream, like the silent Christ on the hand-carved cross.

She resumed her humming as the details began to take shape.

3

‘You put the heart crossways in me.’

Irish expression for being given a bad fright.

There’s an open-plan café in the Eyre Square shopping centre.

Eyre Square was still in the throes of a major redevelopment and, like everything else, was two years behind completion. En route to the centre, I’d stopped for a moment by the site of Brown Doorway which, like the statue of Pádraig Ó’Conaire, had been removed. They’d promised they’d restore them and there were maybe three people in the city who actually believed it. There’d once been a monument to Lord Clanricarde in Eyre Square. Like a metaphor for all our history, it had been paid for by his tenants and, need I add, against their will. My father had told me of the wild celebrations in 1922 when it had been taken down, and, nice touch, after they hammered it into smithereens they used the base for the statue of Ó’Conaire.

You look straight down the Square and there’s the Great Southern Hotel, though what was so great about it was anyone’s guess. It was expensive, but then, wasn’t everything? According to a recent poll it was cheaper to live in New York. When I was a child, two cannons had stood sentry right where the hotel stood and the whole park had been circled by railings. They were long gone.

As were the fairs.

Fair day in Galway meant fair day in Eyre Square. These affairs began around four a.m. Get at it early.

And they did.

Cattle, sheep, pigs and horses were paraded with varying degrees of pride and cunning. The real winners were the pubs which sprang up to cater for the crowd. And of course along came a bank. The Bank of Ireland, to my back, had now a massive building, begun no doubt in those better times.

Deals were still made on Eyre Square but they involved dope, women, passports and, naturally, booze.

I sighed for a loss too profound for articulation and turned, walked past Faller’s the jeweller’s and crossed the road into the centre proper. Took the down escalator, in every sense, and went to the café on the lower floor.

You sit, have a snack, watch the tourists. Scarce this year, due to fear of flying, terrorists, rising prices. All the retail outlets had SALE signs in the windows, a sure sign of desperation and a recession on the slide. Our Celtic Tiger had roared and loud for nigh on eight years and man, wallowed in its trough. Now the downside, we didn’t feed that goddamn animal and the whore died.

Got me a latte, a slice of Danish I hadn’t touched and the *Irish Independent*. We’d done woesome at the Olympics, maybe the worst ever. Our best and our brightest, Sonia O’Sullivan, had trailed in last. You want to see the difference between the good old USA and us ... one of our athletes came eleventh. We were delighted as he’d achieved a *personal best*. The American swimmer currently on his fourth Gold was depressed as he wasn’t going to emulate the achievement of Mark Spitz. At the very beginning of the Games, the Irish team had been rocked by a dope scandal. The guilty party said I

hoped to work with anti-doping boards when his two-year ban was up. And we applauded him. Fuck was it just me or was the country getting crazier? Religion, however heavy its hand, had for centuries provided a ballast against despair. Mired in more and more disgrace, the people no longer had much faith in the clergy providing anything other than tabloid fodder. It probably explained why every new fangled cult had managed to find a congregation in the city. Even the Scientologists had an office. We were expecting Tom Cruise any day.

It was only a few years since I'd been a regular churchgoer, the priest even called me by my first name, but the Magdalen Laundry's revelations stopped me cold, and a black leather coat I'd brought back from London had been stolen during Mass and I wouldn't swear to it but I saw a priest wearing one very similar.

The newspapers were screaming about a crucifixion, but I skipped that, moved to the more mundane stuff. I sipped my coffee, read about the furore at the Black Box, a venue on the dyke road – simulated lesbian performance had outraged residents. Further along the way, in Bohermore, a shop selling sex items had to close due to pickets. The proprietor sneered, 'They thought we were having sex in the shop.' He added that the huge publicity had ensured the success of his new premises in the city centre.

I reached for my cigarettes, then realized I didn't smoke any more. And even if I did, you weren't allowed to smoke in the area. The Irish, despite all expectations, had gone along with the new law without a murmur. Had we lost our balls?

You betcha.

I threw the paper aside. A young man with long, dank hair sat opposite me. He'd a can of Red Bull. There was no real physical resemblance to Cody, but he reminded me of him and that was a hurt as harsh as the black coffee I wished I'd ordered.

He reminded me too of Joey Ramone. He slurped from the can and I mean *slurped* – among the most annoying sounds at the best of times, but with a very bad mood almost unbearable. I wanted to reach over, slap his face, roar *Have some fucking finesse*. Reined it in, finished the latte and considered a double espresso. The kid was looking at me. Was it myself or was he smirking?

I stared at him, asked, 'I know you?' Let a dribble of edge in there.

He drained the can, began to crush it, bending it out of shape, flicked long strands of hair out of his eyes, answered, 'Sorry sir, I was miles away.'

Lots of attitude in the *sir*.

A radio was playing in one of the shops and I heard Morrissey with his current hit, 'First Of The Gang To Die'. Gives me a shiver, something prophetic in that. The kid was staring at a scar on his face, the result of a bad beating from two brothers who were not fond of the tinkers.

'That from a knife?'

I touched the spot. I was still attempting to get used to the odd fact that my voice had altered since I stopped smoking, like I've smoked a million cigs, washed over with rotgut, less husky than fucked. I sort of admired his cheek and went, 'How would you know that? You in the army?'

Not that I thought for a moment he was. He was too fragile.

He grinned, answered, 'No, just London.'

He was scratching his arms. I recognized the speed burn, and then he started to talk, a spew of words, his mouth unable to keep up with the flow of thought. 'You ever listen to The Libertines? Pete Doherty, their singer, is like, gone from dope, and The Black Keys, 10 AM Automatic, fatback blues and I've gotta get me some Prodigy. Dunst, he's living the dream, man, and you ever get to London, you gotta hear Roots Manuva, he's like –'

He paused, losing the thread, then, 'Razor rap and funny, you know?'

Stopped, realizing he'd given me a mini lecture on music, just like Cody used to do, without me

ever mentioning it.

So I cut him some slack, said, 'You like music, kid?'

His attention span was so like Cody's. One minute he was focused on you, then, bang, he was off again, as if one thought, one line of concentration was too much. He stood up. 'See you around.'

Then he paused, added, 'Dude.'

The movie *Wayne's World* has a lot to answer for. It was one of Cody's favourites. I had no reply for this – not then, not now. I simply nodded and he shambled off, in that half crouch young people adopt like, who gives a fuck?

A waitress began clearing the table. She held the bent Red Bull tin, pissed by it, indicated my slice of Danish. 'You going to eat that?'

I looked at her and asked, 'You like The Prodigy?'

I had a mobile phone. Not that it ever rang, but it made me feel vaguely connected so I dutifully recharged it daily. Carried it like a sad prayer in my jacket.

Went to McSwiggan's. There's a tree in the centre of the pub, always reassures me that the country still has a sense of the absurd.

It's situated in Wood Quay, not a spit away from Hidden Valley, where I once briefly had a home courtesy of the tinkers. Wood Quay is one of the few real neighbourhoods in Galway. The people have lived there for generations and managed to hold on to their homes despite the rampant development. You stand at the bottom of Eyre Street and you can see the whole of the area, the park that is still so green, still untouched, where the kids play hurling and, OK, frisbee, but hurling has the upper, for the moment, and just beyond it is Lough Corrib. It gives a sense of community and they have their own street carnival every year. They are fiercely proud of how they've managed to stay intact in a city with so many rapid and ruthless changes.

McSwiggan's is right at the beginning of the neighbourhood. A newish pub, it has somehow grabbed an echo of old Galway. The tree is right in at the back and yes, they built the pub round it. Now that to me is called having your priorities correct. And more of a rarity, the staff are all Irish. This is becoming more and more of an oddity.

It was just after twelve and the bar guy was doing pub stuff, a frenzy of glass-polishing, stocking shelves, but cheerful with it.

'Howyah?'

I acknowledged I was OK, ordered a pint and a small Jameson.

'Ice with that?'

I gave him the look. Was he serious?

He said, 'No ice it is.'

The pub smelled odd and he noticed me noticing, said, 'It's the lack of nicotine.'

Christ, he was right.

Then he added, 'Our showjumper got a gold medal.'

I was delighted. I don't know shit from horses, but a gold, the country would be on the piss for a month.

He let my pint sit before he creamed off the head – knew his stuff – and put the Jameson on the counter. 'I've a ticket for the Madonna concert.'

Almost like the old Ireland, telling you their business without you ever asking. I took a smell of the Jameson and instantly I was convivial.

'You're a fan, right?'

Not the brightest query seeing as he'd a ticket, but luckily logic counts for very little in such exchanges. He was horrified.

'Don't be fecking mad, I hate the cow.'

I managed to keep the drink on the table, not to drink it. You have to think, *What demented ordering booze and not drinking?*

I know just how mad it was. But it kept me sober, if far from sane.

I thought of Cody, lying in the coma, and of Kate Clare too, the woman who killed the priest and was now my prime suspect for shooting Cody. I knew I should be devoting more energy to finding her or whoever did the shooting but I couldn't get past Cody and his condition. He'd been the surrogate son I'd never dreamed I'd have, then just when we bonded, when I'd actually begun to think of him as family, he'd been snatched from me.

A vengeful God?

He certainly had it in for me. Every time I seemed to get up off me knees, He wiped the fucking floor with me. Did I believe in Him? You betcha, and it was real personal. I'd mutter in the morning *Do Your worst and let's see how I take it*. A hollow taunt in the face of chaos, bravado in place of faith. I shook my head to clear it of God and His spite, stood, figured it was time to head.

Leaving, I said to the bar guy, my untouched drinks sitting like forlorn friends, 'Hope the conce goes well.'

He paused, mid-glass-cleaning, gaped at me, said, 'I'm praying for rain.'

In Ireland you don't have to pray too fervently for that.

4

'A crucified without a cross.'

Description of the saint Padre Pio by the faithful.

When I was first visiting Cody in the hospital, I was waylaid one afternoon by a man. He had the pious look beloved of priests and do-gooders.

He said, 'Are we feeling better?'

I was not a very good hospital visitor, not one of those cheery stoic folk who enrich your day when you encounter them. I was bad tempered, hurt and dying for a drink. I stared at him. 'I don't know about you, pal, and truth to tell I don't care, but I'm feeling like shite.'

He nodded, could deal with aggression, in fact looked like he expected it. He was not going to be disappointed. He leaned closer, said, 'Anger is good. Get that bad vibe out there. Don't hold it in.'

We were in the corridor outside Cody's room and, as always, I was bracing myself to enter, so the diversion wasn't unwelcome. I started to walk away, glad of the reprieve, and he followed as I knew he would.

We reached what is called the *long ward*, open planning if you will. Row on row of beds, no privacy. I'd occupied more than my share of them.

'Where did you learn that crap? I mean, at home, when you're sitting in front of the telly, do you seriously talk like that? Jeez, I mean, come on.'

More smiles. I was obviously the dream he nurtured.

I asked, 'And who the hell are you, apart from a monumental pain in the ass?'

He did a thing with his eyes that was meant to convey compassion and – what's the buzz word? yeah, empathy. Made him look shifty. Would you buy a used car from this guy?

Nope.

He was cooking now, said, 'See me as a non-judgemental friend.'

Like that was going to happen.

I said, 'You want to be my friend, you could do me a favour. How would that be, as a sign of our closeness?'

Slight cloud over his cheerful face, he asked, 'Erm, OK, what would that be?'

'Hop over the road to the Riverside Inn, grab me a bottle of Jameson.'

He sighed, leaned back, as if this was the very thing he knew he'd hear, let out a long breath. 'And herein is the crux of the matter.'

Crux.

Is there a class in these guys' training, say day three, when they're given a booklet containing all the words they can use that no one else does, which they can just lob into the conversation, kill it stone dead.

I'd stopped at the end of the long ward. The very last bed was empty and that meant only one thing: the patient had died. They keep that bed for the ones who aren't going to make it so they can whisk them out of there in jig time, without disturbing the other patients. I stared at that empty bed, a myriad

of dread in my gut.

When I didn't respond, he added, 'Alcohol seems to have been a major part in your ...'

He selected the next word like a spinster eyeing a box of her favourite chocolates: didn't go with *downfall*, though he considered it, opted for the less dangerous '... trouble.'

I asked, 'You want to hear about my life when I was sober, when I wasn't drinking, you want to know about the success that was?'

He shifted his weight, suspecting this was not going to be pleasant.

'If you wish to share.'

I got right up in his face. He'd have backed off'cept he was up against the death bed.

I said, 'Yeah, I was sober, hadn't had a drink in months, and guess what? I got a little girl killed. Three years old, the most beautiful child you ever saw, a fucking dote, and there's me, not drinking. Minding her, she goes out a top-floor window. And her parents, my best friends, how do you think they felt about me being sober then?'

He didn't have a platitude but tried, 'Life is no bowl of cherries and sometimes terrible things happen. We must move on, not let events sour us.'

I stopped, stared at him, near shouted, 'No bowl of fucking cherries? You're unbelievable. If I ever run into the child's parents, I'll mention the goddamn cherries, I'm sure that will really ease the grief.'

I was seething, had to move, so I eased up on the physical crowding I'd been doing, let him loose and began to move out towards the nurses' station. He was following behind me.

I said, 'Listen – you listening? – I'm going for a piss. You come in behind me and I'll kick you in the balls. That facing my anger? That real enough?'

But these guys, you're talking to a granite wall. He looked like he was going to extend his arm, maybe embrace me, and that would have been such a mistake.

He tried, 'Jack, Jack, I'm reaching out to you. Do you really want to keep making the same tragic choices?'

Turning to go into the toilet, I asked, 'You familiar with Dudley Moore?'

He sensed a trap, ventured, 'Erm, yes.'

I looked round as if I was going to take him into my confidence, said, 'Dudley Moore was interviewing his great friend Peter Cook, asked him if he'd learned from his mistakes, and Cook replied, "Yes, absolutely, I can repeat them almost perfectly."'

In the bathroom, a man trailing an IV was trying to have a pee. He looked at me and said, 'What way for a grown man to end up.'

I had no argument there.

That encounter with the zealot was replaying in my mind as I strolled along Shop Street. When I'd left my flat I'd been in a reasonable state of mind, but this flashback was bringing me down and fast.

Summer was definitely over. That peculiar light, unique to the West of Ireland, was flooding the street – it's a blend of brightness but always with that threat of rain, and it glistens like wet crystal even as it soothes you. The edge of darkness is creeping along the horizon and you get the feeling you'd better grab it while it lasts.

Outside Eason's Bookshop, a group of Christians were singing a rock version of 'One Day At a Time'. They had the well-scrubbed faces of clean-living young people. A girl in her late teens detached herself from the group when she noticed my interest, pushed a batch of leaflets at me and said, 'Jesus loves you.'

I don't know why but my mood was lifting: I was en route to the pub, the light was giving its last

burst of spectacular clarity. But she annoyed me and I snapped, 'How do you know?'

~~Took her aback, but the training kicked in and she produced the requisite dead smile with a well-rehearsed slogan.~~

'Through music, we are making Christianity better.'

Same tired old shit with a shiny gloss. A few days back I'd watched *King of the Hill*, an episode where Hank confronted a set of trendy born-again. Their combination of evangelism and tattoos really pissed him off. I faced the girl now and used the line Hank had retaliated with.

'You people aren't making Christianity better, you're making rock 'n' roll worse.'

Didn't faze her. Using her index fingers she made the sign of the cross, like you would to ward off a vampire, and muttered some incantation. I moved on, the sound of their singing like an assault on my ears. Right beside Eason's, almost, is Garavan's, one of the old pubs, still not yet modernized. Books and booze, neighbours of our heritage.

The barman saw the leaflets in my hand, Jesus in large red letters on the front.

'They convert you?'

I leaned on the counter. 'Take a wild flogging guess.'

He began to build my pint of black, reached behind for a shot of Jameson, his movements a flourish of action, no break in the sequence, all the more impressive as I hadn't asked for either. He said, 'Believe it or not, they're good for business. People hear them, think, *Christ, I need a drink.*'

I didn't inquire as to how he knew my order. I was afraid he'd tell me.

The smallest event can sometimes trigger a whole set of actions and as I got my hand on the glass I saw the girl's sign of the cross and remembered the crucifixion. Ridge was on my mind, too. In the most bizarre way, I loved her – fuck, not that I'd ever admit that, ever. She irritated me to the ninth level of hell and beyond, but what else is love but all that and still hanging in there? Her being gone only added to the conundrum. Ah, I was a mess. And Cody, wasn't he a victim of some cold bastard? Some ruthless whore who just took him out. That girl had cursed me and opened yet again the road to devastation, but it was the road I travelled most.

I took my drinks and moved over to the snug, a small cubbyhole designed to give you if not peace then a degree of privacy. The pint of Guinness was a work of art. Perfectly poured, the head a precise slice of cream. Seemed almost a shame not to drink it. Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* came unsought into my mind. If I'd only had a little foresight – the last lines of that terrifying book, the throw a dead dog into the grave, on top of the dead consul. I didn't see any connecting lines and what an irony be there.

You sit behind a pint like that, a pure gift, with the Jameson already weaving its dark magic on your eyes, you can believe that Iraq is indeed on the other side of the world, that winter isn't coming, that the Galway light will always hold that beautiful fascination and that priests are our protectors, not predators. You won't have the illusion for very long, but the moment is priceless.

I didn't have any more hope in religion, so I took worship at whatever altar provided brief solace. Of course, like the best shot at heaven, it was surrounded by hell on every border. Then I chided myself, muttered *enough with the deep shit, it's just a bloody drink*, and I'd raised the glass when a man peered round the partition.

'Jack Taylor?'

I might actually have drunk that time. This was my Russian roulette, Irish style. Each time I ordered a drink, I never knew if I'd actually swallow it, but I was fairly sure I would do soon, and deep down I hoped so. I looked at the man who had spoken my name with familiarity.

I was tempted to deny it. No good ever came of these inquiries. I didn't hide my annoyance.

'Yeah?'

He was big – over six foot – in his early sixties, with a weather-beaten face, a bald head and nervous

eyes. Wearing a very fine suit and solid heavy-duty shoes, he said, 'I'm sorry to disturb you, but I've been looking for you for quite a few days.' A slight testiness in his tone, as if he had better things to do than search for me.

I touched the pint. It felt good, if a little soured by the interruption.

'So you've found me. What's your problem?' I didn't make any attempt to disguise my irritation.

He put his hand out. 'I'm Edward O'Brien.'

I ignored his hand, asked, 'And that's supposed to mean something? Tell you, pal, it don't mean shit to me.'

He gave an almost knowing smile. 'They told me you'd a sharp tongue but a good heart.'

Before I could respond to this piece of nonsense, he said, 'I need your help.'

More to get rid of him than out of interest, I asked, 'For what?'

'To find my dog.'

I nearly laughed. Here I was, fixing to find who crucified a man, and this lunatic lost his dog?

'You're fucking kidding, someone put you up to this, it's like some kind of lame joke.'

He was shocked. His face registering hurt, he said, 'I love that little guy.'

I shook my head, waved him away.

He didn't go, continued, 'I'm a professor at the university and I represent the residents Newcastle. Are you at all *au fait* with the area?'

Au fait!

And being a professor, like that was going to cut some ice with me. The last professor I encountered had been a murdering bastard. I near shouted, 'Yo, Prof, I'm from Galway, I know where the bloody place is.'

He ploughed on.

'Five homes have had their dogs stolen. We heard you were good at finding things, and we'll pay you.'

When I didn't leap at the opportunity, he added, 'And pay well.'

The temptation to go *Doggone* was ferocious.

I said, 'Leave it with me, I'll see what I can do.'

He straightened up. 'Thank you so much. It means an awful lot to us.'

He was on his way when I said, 'They were wrong, what they told you about me.'

His face brightened. 'That you had a sharp tongue?'

'No, that I had a good heart.'

5

Cross-eyed.

Back in my apartment, I was preparing for my siesta. I had my own version of this deal: try to get some food down, half a painkiller/tranquillizer and sayonara suckers. Pulled on a long T-shirt with the logo THE JAMES DEANS, brushed my teeth and had a brief look at Sky News. Maybe the world had improved.

It hadn't.

The Republican Convention was taking place in New York. Christopher Hitchens had written that was going to be a tight race and I believed him. Chechen rebels had seized a school and were threatening to kill three hundred kids if their fighters weren't released. One of the little girls was dragged to safety and I swear, she was the spit of Serena May. Part of the whole mountain of guilt and remorse, was that every little girl reminded me of her. How could they not?

I switched off fast, swallowed the medication and waited for it to meld into the blood, muttering 'God, I know you've fucked me good and probably for all time, but hey, cut me a bit of slack – no dreams of the child, or you know what? I'll drink again.'

Yeah, threatening God, real smart idea, like He gave a toss in the first place. But what the hell.

I added as a rider, 'Didn't I help a priest, doesn't that count?'

Probably not.

A knock on the door.

'Fuck.'

Could I risk ignoring it? Sleep was already creeping along my nerves. More knocking and I sighed and opened it.

Ridge.

She was in uniform, looking serious, intimidating.

I said, 'I paid my television licence, officer.'

She was not amused, but then, she rarely was. Our relationship was usually combative, aggressive and however much we tried, we never could get free of each other. Before Cody had been shot, we reached a sort of warmth. She was in a relationship and it appeared we might establish some sort of friendship.

I'd saved her from a very vicious stalker and I knew how much she appreciated it, but she reacted with hostility to being indebted, and God knows, no one understood this better than me. You help me out, I feel like I owe you, and till the sheet is clean I'm uneasy, jumpy, and what I know best is antagonism. The terrible truth, and we both knew it, was we needed to be linked, *were* linked, and somewhere in all that mess we were both scared we'd lose each other.

Is this fucked up? Sure. Or maybe it's just pure Irish.

I often thought, if only she weren't gay, would there be something?

If I wasn't an alcoholic. If ... if ... if.

Back through the years, we'd helped each other more than anyone else. Then we'd reach a plateau of near intimacy and one or both of us would scuttle for cover. Wouldn't it break your heart. It certainly broke mine, and as for Ridge, a smashed heart was written on her face if you could get past

the front.

~~But the shooting had changed everything. My bitterness was not going to bring back the vague thread of closeness we'd been near.~~

She accused, 'You're only getting up?'

Her face was devoid of make-up and she looked strained.

'Actually, I was going to bed.'

She made a show of checking her watch. 'It's one thirty in the afternoon.'

I was tempted to slam the door in her face, shout, *Aw, fuck off*, but went with 'You came round to tell me the time? I have a watch.'

She brushed past me and marched into the sitting room.

I closed the door, said, 'It's not going to endear me to the neighbours, having Guards at the door.'

She looked round, not seeing anything to improve her mood, so I asked, 'You want something? beer, a large whiskey?'

Needling her.

She said, 'I'd have thought jokes about alcoholism were hardly appropriate.'

We stood, hostility swirling round us till I asked, 'What, you came round, figured you'd just buy my balls? Things a bit slow on the traffic front?'

The wind seemed to go out of her. She slumped in a chair, asked, 'You know how hard it is, being a Guard?'

I wanted to shout, *Hello, I used to be one*, but said nothing.

She continued, 'And being a woman – a gay woman – they love that. You just know you're not on any promotion list. Last year they issued us with skirts to soften our image, like a thug is going to appreciate the difference, drop his knife and say, "Sorry, didn't realize you were wearing a skirt." None of the other women wear them. I have my baton, a utility belt that takes the handcuffs, has a pouch for the radio, a face shield for mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and latex gloves for health and safety, especially when you have to search a body.'

She gave a small shudder as she said this, then added, 'They allow make-up, did you know that? As long as it's not red lipstick or blatant. Our hair has to be a certain length. There's a bitch, my sergeant, she measures my hair, so I started to wear a ponytail and she said it had to go under my cap.'

It was like she'd never really allowed herself to examine the details of her job and I wondered where this was going. She wasn't finished.

'We're supposed to take turns in the patrol car and that's always in pairs. On the beat, you're often on your own. You know how many times I've got to ride in the car?'

I had to say something so tried, 'Not often, I'd guess.'

'Never. Is that fair? But what am I saying? Fair isn't the deal. I get stuck in the station a lot. I hate that, it's like being in an office, people looking for driving licences, passports or reporting thefts. It's so boring. Then they bring in a drunk, a lot of drunks ...'

She eyed me. I was obviously in that category.

I was tempted to mock, *Ah, poor little Ridge, they won't let you ride in the big car.*

But I held back and she went on, 'The thing is, I love being a Guard, but if I don't get promoted soon, I'll have to consider resigning.'

Her face as she said this was a tragedy in miniature. Sleep was trying to claim me and I wanted her to fuck off, so I said, 'Do whatever you have to do to get the promotion.'

She looked right at me and I realized we'd come to the whole point of the visit.

She said, 'I'm very worried about a health problem and I don't know who to tell.'

Sometimes simplicity is the only route, so I said, 'Tell me.'

She took a deep breath.

‘I found a lump on my breast. It might be just tissue, but –’

I didn’t hesitate.

‘You have to get it checked.’

She was lost for a moment, imagining, who knows, what horrible implications.

I pressed on. ‘Ridge, promise me you’ll make an appointment.’

She re-focused.

‘OK, I will, but there is something else.’

I waited. She asked, ‘You know about the crucifixion?’

I nodded, even though I knew precious little.

She said, ‘He was eighteen years of age, John Willis, they nailed him to the cross and mounted the thing on the hill above the city dump. We thought maybe it was a drug deal, a warning to others, or maybe even political. It isn’t. He comes from a respectable family, was due to start college and has no record.’

She waited for my input.

I was stunned, shocked, sickened. Visions of Cody were in my head and I thought I might throw up. Took me a solid five minutes before I could gasp, ‘Any leads?’

She composed herself, curbing the excitement the case stirred in her. ‘We have nothing – no leads, nothing to go on, it’s dead in the water. But if a person were able to shed any light on it, it would be a career-maker.’

It took me a moment to grasp.

‘Ah no, you want me to nose around. You’re the one always telling me to get out of this whole sordid game, that it will destroy me.’

She at least had the grace to seem ashamed, then said, ‘I don’t want you to do anything dangerous but you have an uncanny knack for finding threads.’

Before I could refuse – and refuse I intended – she took out a sheet of paper and said, ‘Here’s the name, he lived in Claddagh, I’ll leave it here. Just think about it, OK? That’s all I ask, Jack.’

Jack.

She never used my first name. It was a measure of her desperation.

As she was heading for the door she said, ‘You look beat, get some rest.’

With all the sarcasm I could muster, I said, ‘I’m touched by your concern. The next time I see you I want to hear you’ve been for that check-up.’ I tried to keep my tone light, not show how worried I was.

She was in the hall, a ray of light catching the gold buttons on her tunic. Looking almost impressive and vulnerable, she said, ‘I’m not concerned, I was just trying to be polite.’

I shouted after her, ‘Try harder.’

I slammed the door, letting the neighbours know I was back and with ferocity. Picked up the piece of paper, read:

John Willis
3, Claddagh Park
Galway

I sat in the chair, and before I could even begin to think about it, my eyes closed and sleep grabbed me.

Herbert Spencer wrote: ‘There is a principle which is a bar against all information, which is pro-
against all arguments and which cannot fail to keep a man in everlasting ignorance – that principle
contempt prior to investigation.’

I, of course, have no idea what Spencer looked like, but in my addled sleep he appeared, carrying
hammer and nails and quoting the above, and then began shouting that this was not going to be solved
as I was not in the right frame of mind. He looked a bit like my father and then roared, in Irish, ‘*B
curamach!*’

Be careful.

Ridge was in the dream too, but her part is lost to me, save she was extremely unhappy. Serene
May, the dead child, of course appeared, her sad eyes locked on me till I woke, whimpering, drenched
in sweat.

My apartment was dark, and I fumbled to see my watch ... Jesus, seven o’clock, I’d been out for
five hours. Resolved I’d cut way down on the sleepers. I made no such resolution regarding the
bitterness – that was the only fuel I had.

6

‘Sed libera nos a malo.’

‘Deliver us from evil.’

The Lord’s Prayer

The girl remembered the green walls of the mental hospital – puke green. She’d come to in a hospital bed and panic had hit first before she’d realized she was still alive. She hadn’t known if she was relieved or not.

Then she’d seen her father, sitting on the hard chair by her bed, keeping vigil. His head had fallen forward and a slight dribble leaked from his mouth, making him look old. The crown of his head revealed a bald spot, still barely noticeable, but the loss had begun. His whole posture spoke of defeat. She’d known him through his many moods – angry, frustrated, grief stricken – but never, never had he surrendered.

If she stirred, she knew he’d wake, and she needed some time before that happened. She lay perfectly still, her mouth dry, her body feeling weak. But something had changed. She could sense a dark energy above her, waiting to be summoned. Those days after the tragedy, when she’d been inconsolable, she’d begun to lose her mind. She kept replaying how her mother must have felt, those moments before the close. And alone – her mother would have hated that.

The girl had hoarded a stash of her mother’s sleeping pills, and on the street she scored a whole batch of other stuff. She had sat in her room, the pills in line, like tiny soldiers waiting for her order. She liked the colours of them, lots of yellow, red and blue – blue, her mother’s best loved shade. Walking point on those items of relief was the bottle of vodka. She took a deep swig, then ... eenee meeny, miney ... let’s have a blue, then a red ... and why not two yellow, another tot of vodka. She felt the raw alcohol light up her stomach, the voice in her head asking, ‘Are you going to kill yourself?’

And the other voice, still in its infancy – the dark one – answering, ‘I just want the pain to stop.’

That all-encompassing grief had made her howl in silent anguish, her head tilted back, her mouth wide open but forming no sound, like a mute hyena. Her brother had come upon her thus and frightened, he’d backed away, unable or unwilling to try and give her solace. The girl’s voice, the voice of her childhood, attempting one last rally as she popped three red ones – such pretty colours – more alcohol, that young voice saying, ‘Suicide is eternal damnation.’

The dark tone spitting back, ‘And this, this ... the way I am, a quivering mess of grief and anguish ... is this not pure damnation?’

She didn’t remember anything after that, only the dark voice sneering, ‘We rule now.’

Wherever she’d been, that empty place between life and death had been where the transference had begun. The darkness had grown stronger, eroding the old her. She’d let out a deep breath, as if expelling the last remnants of the girl she’d been and, she thought with utter contempt, the weakling she’d been.

No more.

Let the shadows rule. Bring on the spectre of retribution and ferocious revenge.

~~It was then she'd noticed, out of her peripheral vision, flames beginning to build in the corner of the room, though when she looked directly there was nothing there. She'd let out a squeal of pure delight~~

The sound had woken her father. He'd sat up suddenly, alarm on his face and then relief as he realized she was back.

If he'd only known.

He'd taken her slight hand in his own huge fists and squeezed it, saying, 'Tell me, baby, tell me what I can do to help.'

She'd sat up, a strength she'd never had before infusing her, and told him exactly what she wanted. With a delicious sense of power, she'd seen the horror on his face at what she proposed. The clarity of her thinking, shrouded in this new darkness, had been exhilarating.

He'd agreed with all her plans, though she could plainly see he was repulsed at the biblical scope of her vision. But he'd been so relieved to have her back, he'd have agreed to anything.

After he'd left, she'd curled up in a warm posture of total renewal, smiling at how happy he'd been that she hadn't died. Her smile had grown in malevolence as she wondered how he'd feel if he knew precisely who it was that had returned. A soothing weariness began to claim her, and before sleep took her she recalled her mother's description of the Church that was such a vital part of her life.

She'd said, 'Alannah, our Church is all we have. Our Lord Jesus Christ will not be mocked. He will smite those who damage his flock.'

Her mother had been among the finest members of the flock and the girl muttered, almost asleep, the smell of smoke in her nostrils, 'Behold a pale rider, trailing death and vengeance in his wake.'

The words were like black communion in her mouth.

7

In Ireland, among the older generation, it is believed that a prayer said at the foot of the cross is always answered.

I had to go to the hospital the next morning for my daily check on Cody, to see that the wounds were healing and he wasn't getting bedsores. Involved a two-hour wait. The news was on. The siege at the Russian school had ended in horror, disaster. Three hundred feared dead, most of them children. Scenes of them fleeing in their underwear as the terrorists fired at them. I had to move away, heard the gasps of shock from the people in the waiting room. Then a report on Iraq: since the 'peace', over *thousand* American soldiers had died. When the nurse called me I was relieved to get away from the television.

The doctor, cheery, asked, 'How are you feeling?'

Multiple-choice answers:

Horried
Depressed
Hungover
Like a bastard.

Said, 'Could be worse.'

We moved to Cody's bed, he looked ... dead, tubes everywhere, only a slight lifting of his chest indicating any life.

Whatever the hell that meant.

He did a full examination, going *Mmm* and tut-tutting, all guaranteed to put the heart crossways on you. Finally he was done and made some notes on a chart, then, 'He's healing well.'

A *but* hung in the air and I waited. I wasn't volunteering anything. Whatever he thought, he'd get it, they always do, no point in adding to the sheet.

He sighed. 'His body has been subjected to an inordinate amount of ...'

He was searching for a description so to cut to the chase I prompted, 'Punishment?'

I'd been beaten more times than I could count—with a hurley, an iron bar, fists, boots, and always with intent, so you could say I knew about that item. The shooting was like my Oscar, my highest pinnacle, all the others just building to the main event. The only slight deviation being, I wasn't the one who'd been shot.

Throw in the hammering from alcohol and you had the obituary card near complete. I'd picked the right word.

'Precisely.'

I figured we were done and got ready to leave.

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