

A JACK TAYLOR NOVEL OF TERROR

headstone



KEN BRUEN



HEADSTONE

Also by Ken Bruen

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All the Old Songs and Nothing to Lose

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The Mysterious Press
an imprint of Grove/Atlantic, Inc.
New York

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Published simultaneously in Canada

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

ISBN-13: 9780802195043

The Mysterious Press

an imprint of Grove/Atlantic, Inc.

841 Broadway

New York, NY 10003

Distributed by Publishers Group West

www.groveatlantic.com

11 12 13 14 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Philip Spitzer, agent extraordinaire
Lukas Ortiz, mi hermano
Joel Gotler, the wizard
Renate Hutton, who, wonderfully, buys the books

He drained the last of the pint, thought,

“Christ, that was good.”

Another Jay?

Tempting?

Phew-oh.

But he'd had two alongside the batter of pints already. Primarily, he needed a cig. That tipped the balance. He could already feel the first hit of ferocious nicotine. He moved from his stool, brushed the dandruff from his jacket. Normally he didn't notice it but he'd caught sight of himself in the oval mirror with the slogan,

“My Goodness, My Guinness.”

And a frazzled comic zookeeper chasing a pelican with pints of the black in his beak. Nearly made him smile; you just didn't see those ancient slogans anymore. More's the Irish pity. He cursed another of those damn black jackets that showed up every fleck of white. Like stranded drops of snow. He said, “Night all.”

Got a few muttered,

“God bless.”

No warmth though.

Fucking media had given his profession the taint of leprosy. Grudgingly, he conceded the fact he hadn't paid for any of his drinks the whole evening might be a factor.

He thought,

“Bad cess to ye.”

Outside, he stared at the church. Saint Nicholas's. One of the two Protestant outfits in the city and they claimed, some hoofmarks inside the door were made by Christopher Columbus before he set sail to find the New World. He figured they needed all the lures they could conjure. He got out his pack of Major, the strongest Irish cigarette, none of the Marlboro Light shite for him. Smoke or fuck off. He wouldn't be surprised if the decaffeinated tea rumor was true.

Flicked his Bic.

Got the first lethal drags of smoke into his starved lungs.

When the blow came to the back of his skull.

Hard.

He dropped the cig, nearly fell. Then a massive kick to his stomach did drop him to his knees. The muck of Jameson and Guinness spewed forth like a nervous confession. He heard,

“Fucking bastard's spewing.”

Another forceful kick laid him flat on his back. He could barely see, had the mad thought,

“Nothing good happens outside a Prod church.”

He could barely see from pain but he registered three figures.

Was one a girl? He heard,

“He's wearing his dog collar.”

And it was ripped from his neck with the chant of

“Woof

Woof.”

A hand in his jacket, ripping out his wallet. Holding it up for the others to see, a male voice going,
“He’s got a photo in here.”

The chorus,

“Who is it then?

Britney?

Lindsay Lohan?”

An answer.

“Some old cunt.”

His mother.

He made the drastic mistake of trying to get up, surely the young people still had respect?

Right.

The next kick broke his nose.

He fell back.

The girl stood over him, sneered,

“Trying to see up my skirt, yah pervert.”

And shredded the photo into his face, paused, added,

“Nearly forgot this.”

Spat in his face.

He heard

“Who’s for a pint then?”

As they moved away, he allowed himself a tiny amount of hope till one hesitated, came back, and with a slow and deadly aim, kicked him in the side of his head, laughed,

“Forgive me Father, for *you* have sinned.”

A light rain began to fall, drenching what remained of his mother’s torn photo. She’d always wanted him to be a priest. As his eyes rolled back into his head, he muttered,

“Top of the world, Ma.”

*A headstone is but a slab of granite
lashed by an indifferent wind.*

Things were looking up. Late October had brought a week of Indian summer. Be it global warming or
the world going to hell?

Who cared?

We grabbed it while it lasted.

Eyre Square, people lying out in the sunshine. Ice cream vendors peddling slush at five euros a pop.
The country had, on a second referendum, said yes to the Lisbon Treaty. We took that for what it was.

.....a brief stay from Death Row.

I was coming off the worst case of my bedraggled career. Literally, a brush with the devil. I muttered
“Darkness visible.”

Had sworn,

“Never, never going down that dark path again.”

Whatever it was,

the occult,

devilment,

Xanax,

delusion,

it had shaken me to the core. I still kept the lights on in the wee hours. In my apartment in, get this,
Nun’s Island.

Who said God had no sense of the ridiculous?

To add bemusement to bafflement, I met a woman. After the devil, I’d gone to London on one of those
late deal Internet offers. Met Laura. An American, aged forty-two, and, to me, gorgeous.

She made my heart skip a beat. She was a writer of crime fiction. At my most cynical, I thought I was
simply material for her next book. A broken-down Irish PI, with a limp and a hearing aid.

Yeah, that would fly.

Did I care?

Did I fuck?

She liked me.

I grabbed that like the last beads of the rosary. She had rented a house in Notting Hill and was due to
come and stay with me for a week. But hedging our collective bets, we went to Paris for five days, so
if there was any real substance in what we thought we had. February in that wondrous city. Should
have been cold and bitter.

Nope.

Such Gods there are gave us the Moveable Feast. Glorious freak spring weather. We had a lovely hot close to the Irish Institute and were but a Bonjour from the Luxembourg Gardens, where we spent most of our time. I was nervous as a cat, so long since I'd been in a bed with a woman, a woman hadn't paid for, that is. My scarred body, I dreaded she would be repulsed by it. The opposite, she seemed to embrace my hurt and pain. Whispered as she ran her fingers along one lengthy scar, "No more beatings Jack, OK?"

Worked for me.

In Hemingway's beautiful memoir, pastiche, he writes of the miraculous time he and Hadley had and how they felt it would last forever. And . . . wood was all around them and he never touched it for luck. I said that to Laura, she answered,

"You touched my heart, that's all the luck we need."

Would it were so.

Sweet Jesus.

I'd sworn that despite Paris and their customs, you'd never catch me eating food in the park, I'd never be that uninhibited to grab a French roll and eat it as I lay on the grass. I did, loved it, a bottle Nuits- Saint-Georges, the French amazing sandwiches, wedges of cheese, the almost warm sunshine and Laura. Jesus, it was heaven. I even rolled up my shirtsleeves. Made her laugh out loud, she said, "My God, you heathen you."

Like that.

We did all the tourist crap and relished it. Got our photograph taken on Boulevard Saint Michel. I carry the photo in my wallet and never, never now look at it. I can't. But it's there, like the blessing I once believed I'd be granted. Went to the Louvre and again made her laugh when I said the Mona Lisa was little more than a postage stamp.

In Montmartre on the second-to-last day of our holiday, drinking café au lait in the early morning bistros, she reached across the table, took my hand for reasons not at all, said,

"You make me happy."

Jesus, mon Dieu, me, to make anyone happy. I was fit to burst. Our last evening, in a restaurant on the Left Bank, she literally fed me escargots and I thought,

"Fuck, if they could see me in Galway now."

And then her idea:

"Jack, if my next book deal comes through, would you consider living here for six months?"

Was she kidding? I'd have just stayed there then.

In bed that night, after a slow lingering lovemaking, we were entwined in each other and she asked,

"Are you content to be with me Jack?"

I told the truth,

"More than my bedraggled heart could ever have imagined." After I got home and we were arranging for Laura to come to Galway, I went to the church, lit a candle, pleaded,

"I've never asked for much, but if it doesn't screw with some inflexible Divine plan, could I please have this woman with me, could Paris be, indeed, A Moveable Feast?"

And, I don't know, the candle flickered, went out.

An omen?

Maybe.

My drinking. She was aware of it, Jesus, how could she not? But seemed to think there was hope.

I abetted the illusion. No doubt, I'd fuck it up. Sure as the granite on the walls of Galway Cathedral.

But if this were my one last day in the sun, then I intended to bask.

My odd times friend/accomplice/conscience was Stewart. A former drug dealer who'd reinvented himself as a Zen-spouting entrepreneur. He'd saved my life on more than one occasion. I was never sure if he actually liked me but I sure as fuck intrigued him. I could hear strains of Loreena McKennitt carried on the light breeze from somebody's radio. Worked for me, till my mobile shrilled.

I answered, heard,

"Jack."

"Yeah?"

"It's Stewart."

Before I could snap off some pithy rejoinder, he said,

"Malachy has been badly hurt."

Father Malachy, bane of my life. Close confidant of my late mother, he despised me almost as much as I did myself. Stewart still clung to the notion I could be redeemed. Malachy believed I had a future and my present was pretty much fucked too. His ingrained hatred of me was fuelled by the fact I'd once saved his clerical arse. He could have been the poster boy for "No good deed goes unpunished."

But I took no joy in him being hurt, unless I was the one who did the hurting. He was part of my shrinking history and I clung to the battered remnants like an early morning wino and his last drops of rotgut.

I asked,

"How?"

Pause.

Stewart was trying to phrase it as delicately as he could, gave up, said,

"He was mugged."

I nearly went,

"But he's a priest."

The awful fact wasn't that priests were mugged in our new shiny country, it was that more weren't.

Stewart said that Malachy was in UCHG, the University Hospital, in intensive care. I said I'd get there straightaway. He said, hesitantly,

"Ah Jack, go easy."

Then a thought hit me.

Hard.

Steel in my voice, stiffening my question, I asked,

"You think I did it?"

"Of course not."

I eased, said,

“Well, least you think I have some standards.”

He shot back,

“If you mugged him, he wouldn’t be in the hospital.”

“What?”

“He’d be in the morgue.”

And he clicked off .

Reluctantly, I left Eyre Square. Was it my imagination or was the sun already receding? The recession was in full bite. We’d buried the Celtic Tiger ages ago. The papers carried daily dire forebodings of worse to come. The specter of emigration was looming all over again.

And yet.

A huge new outlet for TK Maxx had just opened. “Designer clothes at affordable prices.” The Grand Opening a week before, people had queued for seven hours. The line of recession-proof people had stretched from the statue of Liam Mallow, our Republican hero, past Boyles Betting Shop (free coffee for punters!) along Cuba’s nightclub pink façade, and of course the inevitable off-license (ten cans of Bavarian Lager for ten euros) to the very doors of the new shopping mecca.

On the great day, a local had invoked St. Anthony’s Brief:

.....flee you hostile powers

.....the lion of the tribe of Judah

The root of David, hath conquered.....Alleluia.

Saint Anthony wasn’t available that day, the only alleluias we were familiar with were mangled versions of Leonard Cohen’s classic by *X Factor* wannabes.

Recession my arse.

Swine flu continued to stalk, slow but deadly, across the land. The death toll higher than the government would admit. But hey, they had good news: we’d only a year to wait for the vaccine.

And just to add a kick in the balls, they said,

“It will be administered according to priorities.”

Meaning the likes of me, and such, weren’t on the top ten. I passed down by HMV, who were toutin’ Season Three of *Dexter*, the serial killer who only kills the bad guys.

Maybe we could import him.

Then down past Abracadabra, the home of the drunkard’s beloved late-night kebab. I turned at what used to be Moon’s shop and is now the posh Brown Thomas, selling the latest Gucci handbag at the amazing price of only three thousand euros.

I doubt my late dad ever saw three thousand pounds his whole wretched life.

Passed Golden Discs, now closed (the lease had run out), and reached the Abbey Church. Recently renovated, it looked much the same except the price of a mass card had skyrocketed. I dipped my fingers in the holy water font, blessed myself and headed for St. Anthony’s altar. I lit a candle for Malachy and for my legion of dead and departed. The rate those I knew were dying, I could open my

own private cemetery, issue loyalty cards, and, why not, air miles.

You want something from Saint Anthony, it's real simple,

“Pay him.”

I did.

Shoved a large note in the slot and momentarily was lost for words,

So many dead.

The best and the brightest as always. I prayed for a little girl, Serena-May, who still tore the heart out of my chest.

Back when I'd been trying to find who killed Stewart's sister, I spent a lot of hours with the Down syndrome child of my close friends Jeff and Cathie. The little girl filled me with wonder and yearning. I felt my life had some meaning. Her gurgle of delight when I read to her did what gallons of Jameson failed to do: it gave me ease. Her terrible death, literally in my presence, was a lament of such horrendous proportions that I had a complete breakdown and was in a mental hospital for months. Some things you never reconcile and Serena-May was my daily burden of love and care, crushed beyond all recognition.

I prayed for Cody, my surrogate son, dead because of me. Back in the time of the Tinkers, I'd taken on a young impressionable kid, one of those wannabe American young Irish who saw the world through a cinema lens. In the beginning, I'd given him literally errands to run but, over time, we'd developed a bond, so that I came to regard him as the son I'd never have. It was a time of richness, of joy, of fulfillment in my shattered life. And, what the Gods give.....they sure as fuck take away.

Mercilessly.

He was cut down by a crazed sniper with a hard-on for me.

His loss was a cross I'd never climb down from.

Finally, I asked that I might find a modicum of peace.

*It's not what you read, or even study, it's how you bend
the material
to shape and endorse your own dark designs.*

—Caz, Romanian domiciled in Galway

The basement was lit by thirteen black candles. A flat slab of granite in the rough design of a headstone was supported by beer crates and acted as a table. Three ordinary kitchen chairs were placed thus:

Two on the right side.

One, almost forlorn, on the left.

Top of the table was an ornate throne, rescued from a theatrical shop—like most businesses, gone bust, and the throne had been dumped in the skip. It had been cleaned up and now was alight with velvet cushions and a decorative banner, proclaiming “The New Order.”

Behind, pinned on the wall were:

A—a large swastika.

B—a black-and-white reproduction of a school.

C—a worn, battered T-shirt of one of the death metal groups.

On the right side of the table were two brothers, Jimmy and Sean Bennet. They could have passed for twins but Sean was actually three years older. They both had long black hair that they seemed to take turns in flicking out of their respective eyes. They came from one of the wealthiest, oldest Galway families and had inherited, aside from shitloads of cash:

1—Arrogance.

2—Entitlement.

3—Deep seething malignant resentment.

An Irish version of the Menendez brothers but it was unlikely they'd even heard of that infamous duo. They had a limited range of knowledge, like the product of all the wealthiest schools. They smoked continuously, Marlboro Red, and had identical Zippos, chunky ones with the logo:

Headstone.

Opposite them was the girl. Currently answering to Bethany. That changed as frequently as her mood. Her current look was Goth, deathly pale face, black mascara, eyeliner, lipstick, and, of course, raven hair to her shoulders. As Ruth Rendell titled her novel,

An Unkindness of Ravens.

She was very pretty beneath all of the gunk and she knew it. More, she knew how to use it. She was twenty-three, burning with a rage even she no longer knew the motive for. She had embraced hatred with all the zeal of a zealot and relished the black fuel it provided.

On the throne was Bine.

Older than all of them and so intoxicated by power he never even thought of his real name anymore. In front of him was a small bust of Charles Darwin. Bine had studied and completely misunderstood what he read.

His crew were as he'd ordered, dressed in black sweatshirts, combat pants, and Doc Martens. With the metal toe installed. To his side was a wooden crate containing:

Six grenades.

Three assault rifles.

A riot of handguns.

Eight sticks of gelignite.

Two years, count 'em, two fucking years, to bribe, cajole, steal to assemble that arsenal. They were, he felt, almost..... almost ready. He gestured to Bethany, said,

“Drinks.”

Like most raised in privileged fashion, he had no fucking manners.

A fleeting frown crossed her face but she rose, fetched the bottle of Wild Turkey, the inevitable bottles of Coke,

.....*cos everything goes better with it, right*

Brought them to the table, thinking,

“Same old macho bullshit.”

Jimmy, always anxious to please, fetched the heavy Galway Crystal tumblers and Bethany poured lethal dollops of the Turkey, with a splatter of Coke, handed the first to Bine.

He raised his, toasted,

“To chaos.”

As was the custom, they near finished the drinks on a first attempt and all managed to stem the

“Holy fuck”

that such a dose of Wild demanded.

Bine, his cheeks aflame, said,

“To business.”

Sean stood.

Once, he'd sat while reporting and Bine slashed his face with the Stanley knife. Sean said,

“Attacks:

We've hit the old priest, the lesbian, and await your next target.”

Bine moved his finger, meaning

“Refills.”

That done, he almost seemed relaxed. He caressed his manifesto.

By mangling Darwin, he'd managed to convince them of the urgency of ridding the city of:

the misfits,

the handicapped,

the vulnerable,

the weak,

the pitiful.

Bethany thought it was a crock, but Bine gave her a cold icy channel for her rage, so she acted as if she bought into his motives. And though she despised herself, she had such a lust for him she was prepared to go along with whatever frenzy he'd envisaged. It sated her need to have to lash out alone.

Bine said,

“James?”

Jimmy leapt to attention, went and got the nose candy, a mini headstone, with cocaine done in nine consecutive lines and, naturally, presenting a fifty-euro wrapped note, offered the gear first to Bine.

He did three lines fast, moved the stuff to Sean, who did similar, then Jimmy, and, finally, Bethany.

She didn't give a proverbial toss that they were as chauvinistic as the very society they decried, she did four lines just to fuck with the system.

She smiled as the dope jolted and at their almost boyish cries of “Sweet Jaysus,

Darwin rocks,

Bring it on muthahfuckahs.”

She watched Bine carefully, even as she felt the icy dribble down her own throat. Christ on a bike, though she was A-1 dope, she was in danger of speaking, such was the potency. She knew the K could take her either way:

magnanimous

or

malevolent.

He caught her stare, asked,

“The knife?”

She produced the new Japanese blade he'd ordered, serrated edge and as sharp as a bishop avoiding child molestation allegations.

He studied it, asked,

“And this for whom?”

She bit down, said,

“As you desire.”

Fuck, even to her own self she sounded like a wench in an Elizabethan drama or, worse, a bad Russian Crowe medieval romp. He moved his finger along the edge, letting the fine blade draw blood, sucked at it, the blood on his lips, his eyes on fire, and she knew, sex would be rough, and violent, and the stupid bollix, he'd probably bring the knife to their bed. Men and their macho toys. He said,

“Mmmm.....in keeping with our strategy, I want a retard, but I want him gutted.

Can you do that?”

She wanted to say,

“How fucking difficult can it be, kill a handicapped person?”

Went with,

“When do you want it to happen?”

He smiled. If warmth had ever touched that expression, it had long since fled. He had his teeth filed down to points, adding to the sardonic effect. He said,

“As soon as you find a suitable dribbling idiot.”

She wanted to say,

“Have you been in the pubs in Quay Street recently?”

But irony was not his strong point.

He suddenly leapt to his feet, the Japanese knife curled in his right hand. He said to Sean,

“More drinks me-finks.”

Sean knew when Bine tried to speak Brit, shit was coming down the pike. And hard. He poured the Wild into Bine’s tumbler, trying to disguise the tremble in his hand. Bine began to move down the table, humming, *We are the champions*. Stopped behind Jimmy, who began to turn till Bine laid his hand on his shoulder, asked,

“Why does the priest live?”

Almost a metaphysical question.

Before Jimmy could mutter some answer, Bine leant forward, slashed his cheek from eye to mouth. Blood gushed onto the headstone. Jimmy gasped, raised his hand to stem the flow.

Bine said,

“Let it bleed.”

Cue to Bethany, who moved to the sound system, put on *Exile on Main St*. As Jagger began to moan and Keith laid on the heavy thump, Bine moved back to the map of the school, said, “December Eighth, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, they’ll be having their special treat of turkey in the canteen.”

Swung around, eyed his crew, said, as he literally cackled,

“A turkey shoot.”

*God holds unique plans for those who label others
.....handicapped.*

—Jeff , dad of Serena-May

Tom Reed had been born with Down syndrome.

“Mild,”

the doctor had said.

Tess, Tom’s mum, nearly screamed,

“Fucking mild to you, you golfing bastard!”

And sure enough, the doc was due on the links in, like, jig time, so he didn’t have a whole lot of time to mutter the platitudes. The woman was whining blue murder and he wanted to say,

“You’ll get used to it.”

She never did.

Never.

When her husband heard, he did what was becoming more common: he fucked off .

Permanently.

Then the legion of social workers, with the Gestapo suggestions, “Give him up for adoption.”

Right.

They were just lining up to grab a child with DS. Ten grand bought them a cherubic dote from Russia or the third world. Tess was brief in her response to the suggestions.

“Fuck off.”

She raised Tom with every ounce of spirit and guts she had. Got him through school, then a job in a warehouse. Sometimes, the Gods there be cut a poor bitch some slack, not much but a thread. The lads in the warehouse were all from Tess’s neighborhood, Bohermore, one of the few real communities in the city. They watched out for him. He began as a messenger boy, then over the years, thanks to the lads, he learned to drive a forklift and that was one shit proud day for all.

Not to mention the extra few euros it brought into their home. Tom was tall, unusual for his condition with dark hair, the eyes of a fawn, and the nature of an angel. The day he got to drive the forklift, he literally ran home to tell his mum, shouting, “Mum.....Mum, I got me license, I can drive the big machine.”

She wiped her tears away, said,

“So, takeaway curry tonight and your favorite movie.”

“*Die Hard Th ree .*”

If only she knew how ominous that was.

Truth to tell, Tom would watch anything with Bruce Willis. Tess watched him as he watched the movie, wondering if he thought he was Bruce Willis?

Their life wasn't exactly easy but they relished what they had, primarily each other.

Friday evening, Tom got his wages, and had his ritual in place. Go to Holland's shop, be polite to Mary, buy the big box of Dairy Milk for his mum, and then walk home. In Holland's, a girl, looking through the postcards, smiled at him and he blushed. Got his purchases and left. He walked along Eyre Square and headed up Prospect Hill; he always quickened his pace when he came to the alley that led to St. Patrick's Church. It had shadows and he didn't like those. Then the customer from the shop, the pretty girl, appeared, asked,

"Could you help me please?"

His mum had instilled in him the virtue of always helping people. But the alley?

The girl had a lovely smile, said,

"I dropped my mobile in there and I'm afraid to look for it by my own self."

Bruce Willis would help.

He entered the alley and immediately got a ferocious wallop to the back of his neck. Two young men stood over him, the girl right in front, She said,

"Chocolates. Oh, I so love sweetness."

Tom was getting to his feet, dizzy but still able to stand, protested, "Those are for me mum."

One of the young men, with a livid fresh scar, lashed out with his Doc Marten, smashing Tom's teeth and the other asked,

"Oh, did that hurt?"

And delivered a ferocious kick to Tom's crotch.

Tom threw up all over the girl's boots. She said,

"Jesus wept, I just cleaned them."

Tom was on his knees, still retching, and the girl knelt down to his level, asked,

"You wanna go home to your momma, that it?"

He muttered miserably and the girl said, "But the chocolates, we can't waste them."

One of the men grabbed Tom's head and forced open his mouth, the girl ripped open the cellophane, grabbed a fistful of the sweets and shoved them into his mouth. Then she produced a knife, Tom knew it as a Stanley from work, and she said,

"Little trouble digesting all of them you greedy boy, let me help you."

And slit his throat in one practiced movement. The other man took the box of Dairy Milk, scattered the remains over Tom's falling body, said,

"Sweets for the sweet."

The girl bent down, waited till Tom bled out, said as he gurgled, "Christ, keep it down."

Then rifled through his jacket, found his pay packet, said,

"Payday."

They didn't glance back as they strolled from the alley.

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- [read Natural Ordermage \(Recluce, Book 14\) here](#)
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