

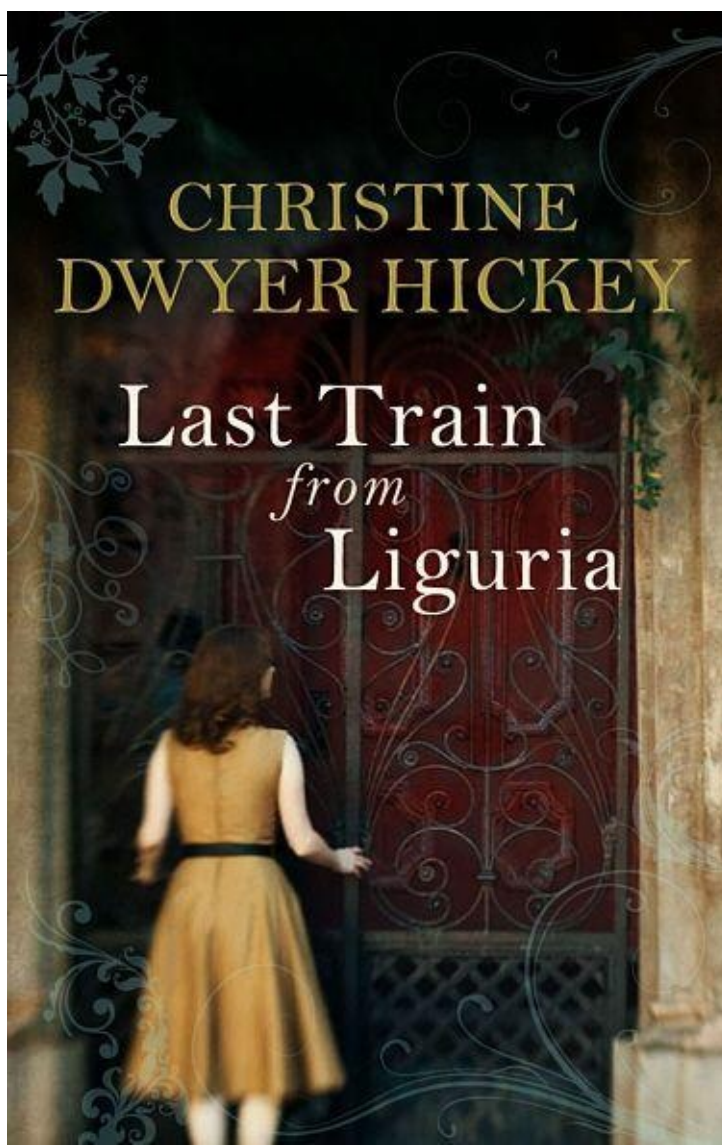


CHRISTINE
DWYER HICKEY

Last Train
from
Liguria

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LAST TRAIN FROM LIGURIA

Christine Dwyer Hickey is an award-winning novelist and short-story writer. Twice winner of the Listowel Writers' Week short-story competition, she was also a prize-winner in the prestigious *Observer/Penguin* short-story competition. Her best-selling novel *Tatty* was longlisted for the Orange Prize and shortlisted for the Hughes & Hughes Irish Novel of the Year Award. She lives in Dublin.

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To Jessica, with love

Long closed the roads to the past,

~~And what is the past to me now?~~

What is to be found there? Bloodstained flagstones,

Or a bricked-up door,

Or an echo that still refuses

To keep quiet, though I ask it to...

Anna Akhmatova, 'Echo'

PART ONE

Edward

August

EVEN BEFORE I CAME to my senses, I knew my sister was dead. In there, face down on the sawdust behind the back bar counter. I was out here meanwhile at the bottom of the stairs, passed out on a mangy carpet. Our father's house. At least, this time, I knew where I was.

The carpet – piss, grease and stale ale – had been luring me home with its stench and after a while persuaded myself to open my eyes. Into the darkness and the ticking of a distant clock, I managed to haul myself onto my feet. Remarkably steady. I noticed this immediately, how steady I was on my pins. And no hangover. Where was my hangover?

I tried to remember. For a long time nothing. Then the sound of a pot-boy wandered into my memory. Banging on the door of some room I'd been in. Calling time maybe, or reciting a message – singing it more like. The pot-boy's song ran so clear in my head, nasal and sweet, innocent and sinister, all at once. I could see bits from Harrison's pub, then Slattery's snug, and all the other dives and kips where I may have been over the past two days or more. Marble and wood; foot rails and slimy spittoons; a murmur of light; a hand made of jelly; the jabber of mouths through a gilt-edged mirror. Wherever I'd been, I was back here now anyway crossing over the hall to the door of the public lounge. Crumpled light on the glass. I stood for a while listening to silence, then, with a wary foot, pushed the door open. The house had been cleared; shutters down, night lights up, the oulfella asleep up in bed – I could hear through the layers of ceilings and floors, the growl of his snore dragging itself backwards and forwards.

Through to the back bar, I switched on the sidelights, then stepped behind the counter. And there she was. Dead as meat.

I tested the air with her name. '*Louise?*'

The sight of her blood. That so much could be contained in one body. Even a body as big as Louise's. An outrageous amount. Long splats across the bar counter, dots on the backdrop mirrors. A velvety puddle lay at my feet and from the corner of a ledge one flimsy string of it dangled in and out of a shadow. I looked at my hands and knew that they had done it.

How long I stayed there or what was going through my mind during that time I couldn't say, but the next thing I remember is kangarooing from my knees and making a dart for the far end of the bar. There, diving under the sink to unhook a bunch of keys, now scratching and poking through locks and bolts until I was in the oulfella's office standing before his safety box, one last long key in my hand.

My mind wouldn't budge. Three clanking sounds from upstairs got it going again; two short, one long. A crash of water, next a flushing chain – the oulfella. I knew his form: sleep for a couple of hours, then piss like a dog for a couple more. Finally he'd get fed up hoisting himself in and out of the scratcher and begin his nightly prow. There was only one thing to do and that was get the hell out of there. I said it to myself as I opened the safe and stuffed a large manila envelope full of notes down the front of my trousers. *Get out.* I continued to say it as I stumbled back through the bar. I was saying it still as I lifted the bolt off the scullery door, cut through the backyard, skirted the barrels and crates, ducked under the clothes line taking a cold wet lick from a bar-towel across my face. *Get out, get out, keep going.* Then I was clawing up the back wall on all fours; grunting and groaning like a wounded pig, knees and elbows knocking off brick, thighs grinding, squirming, struggling. And at last, I was over.

I picked my moment to drop. A spray of hot needles from the soles of my feet rushed into my head blurring my eyes. I looked up at the back of the house and waited for everything to settle. Now I could see the various shapes of the windows, the slant of pipes and guttering, the sill that was beginning to

loosen from the gable end. And a sudden bud of light, breaking softly into the oulfella's window.

~~Behind me a sound. I spun round and there was Mackey. Rising like a cobra rises out of his coils o~~
cast-off coats, unwinding himself from a dirt-thick muffler and stretching out to me a long silvery
tongue that was sticky with sleep. I nearly died at the sight of him. He stepped away from his filthy
nest in the alcove of Quinlan's old coach house. Then, lifting his tilly lamp, pinned me to the
limelight.

'Put that down,' I said.

A moment of mutual inspection followed under the piss-pale light. His overlit eyes glaring into me
and his head – oozing with long matted curls – for all the big size of him, still managed to look like a
exaggeration.

'Mackey – put down the lamp.'

'*Pleathe?*' he said girlishly.

'Please.'

'Who put blood on you?' he asked me then.

I thought for a moment before answering, 'That's not blood, that's paint. Now put down the lamp.'

'Whatpaintwhypaint?'

'The cellar. I was painting the cellar. Keeps the rats away, you know yourself.'

Mackey squeezed his eyes up and gave one of his silent laughs. He lowered the lamp. By now the
light in the oulfella's bedroom window was burning a hole in the back of my head.

'Here, Mack,' I began, 'you wouldn't lend us one of those old coats there for a few minutes?'

'No!'

'Ah go on, just for a minute. It's bloody freezing.'

'No! No no no no no,' he said, the massive curls shaking with his head from side to side.

I knew he wouldn't be quick enough for me. I was over to the coats, and had one dragged out of the
stinking pile, before Mackey had time to think. I threw a 'So long, Mack,' back over my shoulder, as
ran to the top of the lane.

'Fuckarse!' he shouted when I was halfway there.

I turned into Church Street and daybreak was sniggering at me. It was jiggling all over the orphanage
brickwork and spinning a glint on the backs of seagulls making their way down to the river. I ducked
into a tenement doorway to consider my options. There was only the one: the mailboat train. Somehow
I would have to get myself to the station without being spotted, rat-scurrying from shadow to shadow.

By now the city was edging towards Sunday; church bells trapezing across the sky. Soon first
worshippers would be crawling out of their holes. In any case what was I thinking of, hanging around
here, blood on my hands and smeared into my shirt, the Bridewell prison only down the road? A child
barked like a young dog in the tenement above. A woman's voice called, 'Ahhshh sleepsleep.' A milk
cart rolled into a nearby street. The seagulls flew faster and lower to the ground. I looked up the broad
long back of Church Street where a figure on a bicycle was taking shape. A shift-worker maybe, or the
lamplighter getting ready to turn off the city. As the bicycle glided towards me, I pulled back into the
doorway and waited for it to pass. When it didn't, I looked out again. There it was, a few yards away,
coquettishly leaning against a wall.

The child barked again. This time a man let such a roar at it. The milk cart so close now, I could
hear its every chime. I stepped out from the doorway and took a few long strides as far as the bicycle.
Keeping my movements steady and smooth, I put one hand on the saddle and turned it onto the road.
cocked my leg over and pushed into the decline, through the ranting of gulls and the bells at full
heckle; the sound of voices that could be inside or outside my head.

I kept my nerve well enough, until I got to the train station. There, standing before a heavy brown door, everything seemed to fall away, and I had no idea who I was, or where I was, or why I should be standing here in the first place. I could see abstracts of myself on the door's brass fittings and in the doorknob a round miniature of my face was lurking. Yet for the life of me I couldn't give that face a name. Across the brow of the door the word WASHROOM was painted, and over the coinbox a small sign said VACANT.

There was a rat-a-tat noise. By now it was so sharp and insistent that it seemed to be pecking right into my skull and I wanted it to stop, even for a few short seconds – just stop. I had the feeling then that I was an old man, perhaps confused, and easily irritated. I told myself, 'Relax, old man, wait, everything will come back in time.' Yet, when I looked at my right hand it was young. My other hand had gone beyond a tremble, jumping about of its own accord. I could see a coin in the pinch of its fingertips. Both hands were stained and heavily cut, which would at least explain why I was standing outside a washroom. I realized then that the rat-a-tat noise was the coin clacking off the door as my hand tried to get it into the brass penny slot.

Behind me an increased tempo of footsteps and a movement of slender shadows twitched like fish underwater. I thought that's what I was doing, standing underwater. I heard a whistle slash the air, another, and another. A long nasal voice began to call out. Numbers, I heard first. Then names. Names of towns. Destinations. A train station. Yes, yes, Amiens Street. The mailboat train. The mailboat.

Something tugged on the hem of my coat, and I froze all over, except for my left hand which continued to rattle away on the door. I looked down to find the ugliest child I had ever seen.

'What?' I snapped. 'Get lost, go on. Get.'

'It's only me, Mister. *Me*. 'Member me?'

'From where?'

'Only a little minute ago.'

I looked down at his bare feet, and he came back to me then as the scabby-toed paperboy. I remembered then, dumping the bicycle outside the station and edging my way through the usual hawkers and brassers, picking this lad out of the bunch with a tap on the shoulder as I passed him. I had crossed the road and slipped into Portland Lane where he had followed me like a lamb. When we got to the end of the lane, I told him I needed a service. He nodded. I began to open the top button of my flies and saw a sort of resigned dread come into his eye. Yet he still hadn't run, this ugly child, so scrawny he was held together by his own skin. 'For Christ's sake, it's not what you think,' I had snarled, pulling out the envelope of money.

Yes, that was it. The boy had bought me a passage and had found me a coin for the washroom. I had paid him an outrageous price. But then who was I to quibble or judge?

The paperboy reached up and grabbed me by the wrist, holding it steady, taming it. Then he plucked the coin from my fingers.

'Why are you still here?' I said to him. 'I thought I told you to go home.'

He fed the coin into the slot, and we both listened to it slide down the gullet and click. The boy held the door open with his foot. 'Your tickeh is in *dah* pocka,' he said, poking his finger to show, 'don't forgeh now. Platform wan. Five minutes.' I nodded, and he gripped my elbow. 'Stay steady,' he whispered. 'Steady.' Then he handed me a newspaper. 'For you, mister. For to cover your face.'

I was inside. White tiles and a rust-streaked sink. The echo of a slow-drip tap. There was a lump of soap and a thin, hard towel, shaving equipment I decided it might be best to ignore. There was a clothes brush and a nailbrush I could definitely put to use. And there was something in the mirror; but I didn't dare to look.

Before I knew it I was on the train, headed for Kingstown and the boat that would take me to Holyhead. I had made an effort to rinse the blood stains from my shirt in the washroom, and it felt like a cold second skin on my chest now. I could taste the dust that had risen off Mackey's coat since taking a brush to it.

As soon as I settled into the carriage, the missing hangover decided to return, making up for lost time with its full devotion. It caught me by the scruff of the neck and dragged me through fire and ice, fire and ice. It sucked every drop of spit from my mouth and then sucked the bones out of my fingers. It sat on my chest and gnawed at my stomach, it raged through every nook and cranny of me. Even my earlobes felt hot and sore. And I hadn't so much as a drop of whiskey. Why had I not thought to ask the paperboy? Usually whiskey would have been the first thought to come into my head. Now I would have to wait till God knows when and what state I'd be in by then.

It dawned on me, and with no small degree of shock, that I could forget about whiskey from now on. If I was to have any chance of surviving this thing, I would have to live the rest of my life on full and sober alert.

The door to the carriage snapped open and a blind woman was ushered in and introduced by a porter. She barely said good morning when he placed her opposite me, and I barely replied. A certain turn of her head implied conversation would be neither available nor welcome. This suited me fine. I would have preferred to have the carriage completely to myself, but I wasn't doing too badly, considering. Besides, the blind woman seemed to serve as a deterrent to other passengers. A face would come to the carriage window, beam when it spotted the vacant seats, take one look at my lady opposite, and push off again down the corridor. And at least she couldn't see me. Yet there was something unnerving about her marble eyes. Her straight, thin body. Those long, still hands so patient on her lap.

I looked out the window. The skeleton of an umbrella, caught between railings, was gallantly flapping one wing of black cloth. I kept my eye on it until the train heaved and began shoving into its own shrugs of smoke.

Resting against the window, nudging the train on with the side of my head, out of the station, through the rooftops, across the bridge and away from a city to which I now knew I could never return unless to a hangman's noose. And every time I looked back into the carriage the marble eyes were on me. As if they could see every stain and thought in my head.

I was twenty-four years of age; a fool, a thief, a drunk – a hen-headed fucker in fact, just as the oulfella had often said. 'A hen-headed fucker, who ought to have been smothered at birth.' Now he could add murderer to my title. I caught my reflection in the train window, my mouth biting down on my knuckles, my eyes distorted. I felt as deranged as I looked. Anyone outside who happened to look up at the passing train would be bound to notice. I straightened myself up.

After Holyhead – what? Where could I go? I had lived in England for five long years of schooling and although I knew the place, and had learned to adapt to its manners, I had also learned to hate and distrust it. Besides I would be lifted there as easily as here. I needed somewhere further afield. Then Barzoni came into my mind. Because he was the only person I knew well who was living abroad, but also because he was the only one I could force into helping me. My old music master. I knew he had left Dublin in disgrace and gone back to Italy to start over again. I couldn't say exactly where, but surely any half-decent opera house would point me in the right direction? If I could persuade him (and with what I knew, what choice would he have?) to set me up with a reference, an introduction or two; some sort of a position. I had always wanted to see Italy anyway. And so somewhere between Ballsbridge and Booterstown, the first step of my future was decided. Italy.

As the train pushed past the end of the station wall a poster caught my eye. Edward VII puffing on a cigar. King Edward cigars. I tossed it around. Edward King. I had my new name. It was a start.

I was tired then, so tired. And my senses, which for the past few minutes or so had been almost too sharp to bear, were fast becoming indistinguishable, softening and tumbling into each other. So, although my eyes were open, I could see nothing. Nothing at all. But I could hear and feel the colour of blood.

June

IT ONLY OCCURS TO her, the dilemma of her name, as the ship pulls out of Genoa harbour and the Italian voices on deck strike up their commentary of praise. The *bella* city behind them, the *bella vista* of the sea, the *bellezza* of Sicily waiting for them at the end of this long journey. That *bella* little girl in her *bella* little frock. Everything so.

Bella. She hears it over and over, flitting in and out of every sentence, so that for a few bewildering seconds it seems as if she is the topic of all conversations. But they seem to admire everything, the Italians. Then they admire each other. She likes that about them, their childlike ability to be constantly enchanted. Unlike the English, who so often need to be persuaded.

Bella closes her eyes. She hears the drum of footbeats along the upper decks, the yelping carousel gulls, the many exuberant voices. Here and there she tries to untangle a conversation; since crossing the border at Ventimiglia yesterday, it's become an increasing anxiety. Childhood kitchen conversations with her father's ancient Italian godmother; faded textbooks from second-hand barrows along the Embankment; grammar classes in the Scuola di Sorrento on the Brompton Road; even recent nights spent in the translation of long dreary passages at the dining-room table – nothing, but *nothing* could have prepared her for this extravaganza.

The thoughts of Sicily! Of not being understood, not even being able to understand; the child in her care; the rest of the household; and as for the notorious dialect? It could mean having to make a constant nuisance of herself with Signora Lami, asking her to translate this and that. And the Signora's letter had hardly given the impression of an approachable woman, never mind one who would be amused by a résumé that would turn out to be at best an exaggeration, at worst a bare-faced lie. ('I am pleased to say I speak Italian fluently and have difficulty with neither the written nor the spoken word.') What had she been thinking of, to claim such a thing? She would blame the dialect, that's what she'd do. Just until her ear accustomed itself to its new environment. She could say – *Mi dispiace, ma il... il dialecto... No – il dialetto...*

Behind her an old man begins to speak; a rusted voice, a slow delivery, and she is cheered to find she can follow his story with relative ease. He is telling a fellow passenger about the wedding he has just attended. His nephew's wedding, on the far side of Liguria, in a small hilltown called Dolceacqua – perhaps he knows it?

No, the companion does not, but has heard it is a beautiful place. *Certo è bello*. Most beautiful, just as the wedding was, the food, the weather, the olives, the church. And as for the wine of that region! Oh and the flowers. Everything. Everything. Except for, and unfortunately, the bride. When he says this there is a pause – a sigh from the speaker, a soft tut of condolence from his companion. Yet he will not say the bride is ugly, Bella notes, simply that she is not beautiful. *Non è bella*. But she has such a good heart, the old man emotionally concludes. So full of kindness. It is from here her real beauty shines, the heart. They will be happy, he is certain of it.

Of course they will, his companion agrees. Why wouldn't they be? Young, in love, living in Dolceacqua, most beautiful.

And she likes that too, the way they recognize it's not the bride's fault if she is no beauty, the way they imply she must nonetheless be loved, and made happy.

The faces on the dockside recede and crumble. The farewell handkerchiefs relent, and the brass band that an hour ago had caterwauled the passengers aboard plays fewer, weaker notes now. She is happy for a moment. That moment falls from her, is swished away to be replaced by another – this time one of dread. Far too conspicuous, she is, far too alone, here amongst these chattering strangers.

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