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Opening Extract from...

I Am in Blood

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1892 was on its knees. A dying year at the end of a decrepit century, muffled in winter fogs, howling out its last in December gales.

He arrived in Dublin during the withering hours of December the eighth. The Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Across the Irish Sea he came. The crossing was more than choppy, the waves turned into slate fangs by a wind that itself had teeth. The snarl of the sea, the slap and suck of its salt maw, was the only thing that spoke to him on that crossing. The elemental reek of it seeped around him and lined his throat with its stink. The cabin he sat in yawed to the pitch of the water and wind. The lamp overhead, swinging from its beam, cast him in light, then shadow, then light again. For the duration of the crossing the season bawled its lungs out. Then, as the lights of Dublin Port glimmered, fragile, in the weeping dark, the wind died and fell silent. The ship slid into harbour as though on a slick of black oil.

He stepped off the gangplank and on to a quayside greased with lamplight. He stood for a moment amidst a throng of ragged people and listened to the alien bray of Dublin accents. He breathed in the stench of the docks. The organic odours of wood and rot and salt and tar. Of blood and sweat. He stood; black coat, black hat, black bag. He stood; an avatar of the season.

A dying century. A dying year. A killing presence.

Chapter 1:

Dublin,

December 1892

Mary Shortt. Slight and wizened. A woman of blackening teeth and failing lungs. A woman born of Dublin's back alleys and the redbrick labyrinth of its tenements. A woman who stood now on the corner of Sheriff Street and lifted the hem of her skirt as men passed her by. Coaches rumbled over the cobbles. Curtains twitched. The slow sootfall of Dublin's countless chimneys made the black night blacker. Deadening the air. Catching in the throat and griming the lungs with carbon talc. Her calves pale in the darkness. Her thighs. Her skin candle-coloured in the gloom.

Her legs were her best asset. Her dugs, withering year by year, she kept buttoned up behind her bodice. Then again, none of her customers seemed to mind. As they panted on top of her. As they

breathed into her ear. No brothel room for her. No damp bed. No yellowing sheets. No oil lamp softening the scene. Lending a false intimacy to what was, after all, a business transaction. An exchange of services. All Mary Shortt needed was an empty alley or a quiet dead-end.

And every single soul who frequented or plied their trade in the reeking spread-eagle of Dublin's fleshpits would swear to see not a thing. Anything could be happening. Rutting against a wall. Fellatio in a doorway. And all and everyone turned the head and dropped the eyes. Even the Metropolitan Police. Everyone. To do else would be to acknowledge what was happening. To force a moral judgement. To take a stance. God forbid that in Ireland anyone might actually do something about the plight of the poor. About the degradation. About what people were forced to do. Day after day. Night after night.

The quick fumble and the moment of pain.

The folded note and the clink of coin.

It wasn't much of a living but, for someone like Mary Shortt, there wasn't much of a choice.

She stood on her corner and smiled thinly at anyone she thought might throw her a few pennies. Smiled as the cold crept down and the night grew deeper.

God, she thought. What she wouldn't give for a bit of warmth.

Her little patch was emptied of people now. No coaches rattled past. No voices in the soup of smoke and gathering fog. In the distance the sough and suck of the River Liffey gumming at the hulls of steamers and merchantmen. Everything made dislocate by the winter damp. Everything muted and far off.

She was thinking of going home. She was within an instant of saying to hell with things for this evening and scabbing a bottle of gin for to heat her guts in the long cold of the December dark.

But in that instant, a figure appeared.

She watched him come. Up from the docks with quick steps. A tall black hat. A long coat with a cape collar. A fat bag dangling from one hand. Black on black. A deeper shadow in a world of them. She watched him approach and something stirred in her. Something trilled with unease.

On the footpath his shoes clicked in brittle little hacks of noise. All else silence and about his face hot billows of breath.

He stopped in front of her.

'Howya,' said Mary.

The man inhaled slowly and then exhaled slowly. He smiled then and said nothing. That note of unease trilled in Mary once more.

'Are you alright, mister?' she asked.

'Perfectly and precisely.'

Plummy accent. Tone all clipped and vowels narrowed to a sneer. A toff. Over from England, or Mary was no judge of a customer. She had had her fair share of this type. Across slumming it from their manicured estates. A little bit of Irish rough to dandle and brag about at the club, over cigars and brandy.

She'd done worse.

'Well,' she said. 'We'll make this quick. It's bleedin' freezing out here and I ain't got no flophouse to throw down in, so take it or leave it as you finds it.'

The man smiled again. A flat smile that tightened his lips but conveyed no humour or empathy. It was like the smile of somebody who's had a fine meal placed before them. A smile of satisfaction soon to come.

'I like it quick,' he said. 'Quick and clean and sharp.'

'Good. So do I.'

Mary led the man across the road and down into an alley clotted with the leavings of the surrounding tenements. She bent over a wooden box once used to hold apples and lifted her skirts. Her hams skinny and slat-muscled. Waxy in the nip of the night air.

'Well,' she said. 'Let's get this over with.'

Before the pain came she felt the blade in the flesh of her gullet, the soft mesh of her arteries. So sharp its edge was numbing as ice. The brutal intrusion of it though, its alien substance, was a violation against which she instinctively recoiled.

She tried to scream but blood filled her throat and when she gasped, she inhaled the warm flood of her own dying. Her lungs pulled in all that streaming red wet, then spasmed and jettisoned the stuff all over the alley wall.

His hand cupping her chin. Cold hand. Hard. That hand lifted and she struggled, but the second cut came. Deeper than the first. She again tried to scream. To rail against what was being done. Alive and fully aware that in a moment she would not be, she strove to fight it. But her lungs were churning the blood to froth and she was drenched in her own fluids. Soaked and dying as the man steadied her at arms' length, holding her like a marionette.

He watched her drain.

Then her legs gave out and he allowed her to slump onto the alley floor. Down she slumped, down into the mess of her own mortality.

The last thoughts of Mary Shortt were, 'Oh God. Dear God. Please. No.'

The blood coursing in his veins and the throb of his bloodbeat in the stilling of the whore's. Her blood on the cobbles. Tracing a pattern like spilled ink on dimpled parchment. A pattern traced by man over and over again. Leaking down the ragged channels of time. To the last syllable of humanity's final utterance. Order manifest in the primal tracery of a life emptied out and ended. All that blood coiling out and mingling through the years, a confluence of all the elements that made up humanity. Merging and flowing in perpetual flux.

She was still conscious when the man really went to work.