
Opening Extract from...

Christine Falls

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CHRISTINE FALLS

A Quirke Dublin Mystery

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To Ed Victor

She was glad it was the evening mailboat she was taking, for she did not think she could have faced a morning departure. At the party the night before one of the medical students had found a flask of raw alcohol and mixed it with orange crush and she had drunk two glasses of it, and the inside of her mouth was still raw and there was something like a drum beating behind her forehead. She had stayed in bed all morning, still tipsy, unable to sleep and crying half the time, a hankie crushed to her mouth to stifle the sobs. She was frightened at the thought of what she had to do today, of what she had to undertake. Yes, she was frightened.

At Dun Laoghaire she paced back and forth on the pier, too agitated inside herself to stand still. She had put her luggage in the cabin and had come back down to the dock to wait, as they had told her to. She did not know why she had agreed to what had been asked of her. She already had the offer of the job in Boston, and now there had been the prospect of the money as well, but she suspected it was more that she had been afraid of Matron, afraid to refuse when she had asked if she would bring the child with her. Matron had a way of sounding the most intimidating when

she spoke the softest. *Now, Brenda*, she had said, looking at her with those goggle eyes of hers, *I want you to consider carefully, because it's a big responsibility*. Everything had felt strange, the sick sensation in her stomach and the burning in her mouth from the alcohol, and the fact that she was not wearing her nurse's uniform but the pink wool costume she had bought specially to go away in—her going-away suit, as if she was getting married, when instead of a honeymoon she would have a week of taking care of this baby, and not a hint of a husband. *You're a good girl, Brenda*, Matron had said, putting on a smile that was worse than one of her glares, *may God go with you.* She would need His company, all right, she thought mournfully now: there was tonight on the boat, then the train journey tomorrow to Southampton, and then five more days at sea, and then what? She had never been out of the country before, except once, when she was little and her father took the family on a day trip to the Isle of Man.

A sleek black motor car was edging its way through the crowds of passengers going towards the boat. It stopped when it was still a good ten yards away from her, and a woman got out at the passenger side with a canvas bag in her hand and a bundle in a blanket in the crook of her other arm. She was not young, sixty if she was a day, but was dressed as if she was half that, in a grey suit with a narrow, calf-length skirt belted tightly at the waist, her little pot belly sticking out under the belt, and a pillbox hat with a bit of blue veil that came down below her nose. She walked forward over the flagstones, unsteady in stiletto heels, her painted-on mouth pursed in a smile. Her eyes were small and black and sharp.

'Miss Ruttledge?' she said. 'My name is Moran.' Her fancy accent was as fake as everything else about her. She handed over the bag. 'The baby's things are in there, with her papers—give them to the Purser when you get on board at Southampton, he'll know who you are.' She examined Brenda closely, making slits of her little black eyes. 'Are you all right? You look pale.'

Brenda said she was fine, that she had been up late, that was all. Miss Moran, or Mrs, or whatever she was, smiled thinly.

'The parting glass, eh?' She held out the bundle in the blanket. 'Here you are—don't drop it.' She laughed shortly, then frowned at herself and said, 'Sorry.'

What struck Brenda first about the bundle was the heat: it might have been a lump of burning coal that was wrapped in the blanket, except that it was soft, and that it moved. When she held it against her breast something in her insides flipped like a fish. 'Oh,' she said, a weak gasp of surprise and happy dismay. The woman was speaking to her again but she was not listening. From deep down in the folds of the blanket a tiny, filmy eye was regarding her with what seemed an expression of dispassionate interest. Her throat thickened and she was afraid the morning's waterworks might start up again.

'Thank you,' she said. It was all she could think to say, although she was not sure who it was she was thanking, or for what.

The Moran woman shrugged, pulling her mouth up at one side in a sketch of a smile.

'Good luck,' she said.

She walked back rapidly to the car, her high heels

clicking, and got in and pulled the door shut. 'Well, that's done,' she said, and through the windscreen she watched Brenda Ruttledge, still standing where she had left her on the dock, gazing into the opening in the blanket, the canvas bag forgotten at her feet. 'Look at her,' she said sourly. 'Thinks she's the Blessed Virgin.' The driver made no comment, only started up the car.

I

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It was not the dead that seemed to Quirke uncanny but the living. When he walked into the morgue long after midnight and saw Malachy Griffin there he felt a shiver along his spine that was to prove prophetic, a tremor of troubles to come. Mal was in Quirke's office, sitting at the desk. Quirke stopped in the unlit body room, among the shrouded forms on their trolleys, and watched him through the open doorway. He was seated with his back to the door, leaning forward intently in his steel-framed spectacles, the desk lamp lighting the left side of his face and making an angry pink glow through the shell of his ear. He had a file open on the desk before him and was writing in it with peculiar awkwardness. This would have struck Quirke as stranger than it did if he had not been drunk. The scene sparked a memory in him from their schooldays together, startlingly clear, of Mal, intent like this, sitting at a desk among fifty other earnest students in a big hushed hall, as he laboriously composed an examination essay, with a beam of sunlight falling slantways on him from a window somewhere high above. A quarter of a century later he still had that smooth seal's head of oiled black hair, scrupulously combed and parted.

Sensing a presence behind him Mal turned his face and peered into the shadowy dark of the body room. Quirke waited a moment and then stepped forward, with some unsteadiness, into the light in the doorway.

'Quirke,' Mal said, recognising him with relief and giving an exasperated sigh. 'For God's sake.'

Mal was in evening clothes but uncharacteristically unbuttoned, his bow-tie undone and the collar of his white dress shirt open. Quirke, groping in his pockets for his cigarettes, contemplated him, noting the way he put his forearm quickly over the file to hide it, and was reminded again of school.

'Working late?' Quirke said, and grinned crookedly, the alcohol allowing him to think it a telling piece of wit.

'What are you doing here?' Mal said, too loudly, ignoring the question. He pushed the spectacles up the damp bridge of his nose with a tap of a fingertip. He was nervous.

Quirke pointed to the ceiling. 'Party,' he said. 'Upstairs.'

Mal assumed his consultant's face, frowning imperiously. 'Party? What party?'

'Brenda Ruttledge,' Quirke said. 'One of the nurses. Her going-away.'

Mal's frown deepened. 'Ruttledge?'

Quirke was suddenly bored. He asked if Mal had a cigarette, for he seemed to have none of his own, but Mal ignored this question too. He stood up, deftly sweeping the file with him, still trying to hide it under his arm. Quirke, though he had to squint, saw the name scrawled in large handwritten letters on the cover of it: *Christine Falls*. Mal's fountain pen was on the desk, a Parker, fat and black and shiny, with a gold nib, no doubt, twenty-

two carat, and more if it was possible; Mal had a taste for rich things, it was one of his few weaknesses.

'How is Sarah?' Quirke asked. He let himself droop sideways heavily until his shoulder found the support of the doorjamb. He felt dizzy, and everything was keeping up a flickering, leftward lurch. He was at the rueful stage of having drunk too much and knowing that there was nothing to be done but wait until the effects wore off. Mal had his back to him, putting the file into a drawer of the tall grey filing cabinet.

'She's well,' Mal said. 'We were at a Knights dinner. I sent her home in a taxi.'

'Knights?' Quirke said, widening his eyes blearily.

Mal turned to him a blank, expressionless look, the lenses of his glasses flashing. 'Of St Patrick. As if you didn't know.'

'Oh,' Quirke said. 'Right.' He looked as if he were trying not to laugh. 'Anyway,' he said, 'never mind about me, what are you doing, down here among the deadmen?'

Mal had a way of bulging out his eyes and drawing upwards sinuously his already long, thin form, as if to the music of a snake-charmer's flute. Quirke had to marvel, not for the first time, at the polished lustre of that hair, the smoothness of the brow beneath, the untarnished steely-blue of his eyes behind the pebble-glass of his specs.

'I had a thing to do,' Mal said. 'A thing to check.'

'What thing?'

Mal did not answer. He studied Quirke and saw how drunk he was, and a cold glint of relief came into his eye. 'You should go home,' he said.

Quirke thought to dispute this—the morgue was his

territory—but again suddenly he lost all interest. He shrugged, and with Mal still watching him he turned and weaved away among the body-bearing trolleys. Half-way across the room he stumbled and reached out quickly to the edge of a trolley to steady himself but managed only to grab the sheet, which came away in his hand in a hissing white flash. He was struck by the clammy coldness of the nylon; it had a human feel, like a loose, chill cowl of bloodless skin. The corpse was that of a young woman, slim and yellow-haired; she had been pretty, but death had robbed her of her features and now she might be a carving in soapstone, primitive and bland. Something, his pathologist's instinct perhaps, told him what the name would be before he looked at the label tied to her toe. 'Christine Falls,' he murmured. 'You were well named.' Looking more closely he noticed the dark roots of her hair at forehead and temples: dead, and not even a real blonde.

He woke hours later, curled on his side with a vague but pressing sense of imminent disaster. He had no memory of lying down here, among the corpses. He was chilled to the bone, and his tie was askew and choking him. He sat up, clearing his throat; how much had he drunk, first in McGonagle's and then at the party upstairs? The door to his office stood open—surely it was a dream that Mal had been there? He swung his legs to the floor and gingerly stood upright. He was light-headed, as if the top of his skull had been lifted clear off. Raising an arm, he gravely saluted the trolleys, Roman-style, and walked stiffly at a tilt out of the room.

The walls of the corridor were matt green and the woodwork and the radiators were thick with many coats of a bilious yellow stuff, glossy and glutinous, less like paint than crusted gruel. He paused at the foot of the incongruously grand, sweeping staircase—the building had been originally a club for Regency rakes—and was surprised to hear faint sounds of revelry still filtering down from the fifth floor. He put a foot on the stair, a hand on the banister rail, but paused again. Junior doctors, medical students, nurses beef to the heel: no, thanks, enough of that, and besides, the younger men had not wanted him there in the first place. He moved on along the corridor. He had a premonition of the hangover that was waiting for him, mallet and tongs at the ready. In the night-porter's room beside the tall double-doors of the main entrance a wireless set was quietly playing to itself. The Inkspots. Quirke hummed the tune to himself. 'It's a Sin to Tell a Lie'. Well, that was certainly true.

When he came out on to the steps the porter was there in his brown dustcoat, smoking a cigarette and contemplating a surly dawn breaking behind the dome of the Four Courts. The porter was a dapper little fellow with glasses and dusty hair and a pointed nose that twitched at the tip. In the still-dark street a motor car oozed past.

'Morning, Porter,' Quirke said.

The porter laughed. 'You know the name's not Porter, Mr Quirke,' he said. The way that tuft of dry brown hair was brushed back fiercely from his forehead gave him a look of permanent, vexed surmise. A querulous mouse of a man.

'That's right,' Quirke said, 'you're the porter, but you're

not Porter.' Behind the Four Courts now a dark-blue cloud with an aspect of grim intent had begun edging its way up the sky, eclipsing the light of an as yet unseen sun. Quirke turned up the collar of his jacket, wondering vaguely what had become of the raincoat he seemed to remember wearing when he had started drinking, many hours ago. And what had become of his cigarette case? 'Have you a cigarette itself to lend me?' he said.

The porter produced a packet. 'They're only Woodbines, Mr Quirke.'

Quirke took the cigarette and bent over the cupped flame of his lighter, savouring the brief, flabby reek of burning petrol. He lifted his face to the sky and breathed deep the acrid smoke. How delicious it was, the day's first searing lungful. The lid of the lighter chinked as he flipped it shut. Then he had to cough, making a tearing sound in his throat.

'Christ, Porter,' he said, his voice wobbling, 'how can you smoke these things? Any day now I'll have you on the slab in there. When I open you up your lights will look like kippers.'

The porter laughed again, a forced, breathy titter. Quirke brusquely walked away from him. As he descended the steps he felt in the nerves of his back the fellow's suddenly laughless eye following him with ill-intent. What he did not feel was another, melancholy gaze angled down upon him from a lighted window five storeys above, where vague, festive forms were weaving and dipping still.

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Drifts of soundless summer rain were greying the trees in Merrion Square. Quirke hurried along, keeping close to the railings as if they might shelter him, the lapels of his jacket clutched tight to his throat. It was too early yet for the office workers, and the broad street was deserted, with not a car in sight, and if not for the rain he would have been able to see unhindered all the way to the Pepper-canister Church, which always looked to him, viewed from a distance like this down the broad, shabby sweep of Upper Mount Street, to be set at a slightly skewed angle. Among the clustered chimneys a few were dribbling smoke; the summer was almost over, a new chill was in the air. But who had lit those fires, so early? Could there still be scullery-maids to haul the coal bucket up from the basement before first light? He eyed the tall windows, thinking of all those shadowed rooms with people in them, waking, yawning, getting up to make their breakfasts, or turning over to enjoy another half-hour in the damp, warm stew of their beds. Once, on another summer dawn, going along here like this, he had heard faintly from one of those windows a woman's cries of ecstasy fluttering down into the street. What a piercing stab of pity he had felt for himself then, walking all alone here, before everyone else's day had begun; piercing, and pained, but pleasurable, too, for in secret Quirke prized his loneliness as a mark of some distinction.

In the hallway of the house there was the usual smell he could never identify, brownish, exhausted, a breath out of childhood, if childhood was the word for that first decade of misery he had suffered through. He plodded up

the stairs with the tread of a man mounting the gallows, his sodden shoes squelching. He had reached the first-floor return when he heard a door down in the hall opening; he stopped, sighed.

'Terrible racket again last night,' Mr Poole called up accusingly. 'Not a wink.'

Quirke turned. Poole stood sideways in the barely open doorway of his flat, neither in nor out, his accustomed stance, with an expression at once truculent and timid. He was an early riser, if indeed he ever slept. He wore a sleeveless pullover and a dicky-bow, twill trousers sharply creased, grey carpet slippers. He looked, Quirke always thought, like the father of a fighter pilot in one of those Battle of Britain films, or, better still, the father of the fighter pilot's girlfriend.

'Good morning, Mr Poole,' Quirke said, politely distant; the fellow was often a source of light relief, but Quirke's mood this early morning was not light.

Poole's pale, gull's eye glittered vengefully. He had a way of grinding his lower jaw from side to side.

'All night, no let-up,' he said, aggrieved. The other flats in the house were vacant, save for Quirke's on the third floor, yet Poole regularly complained of noises in the night. 'Frightful carry-on, bang bang bang.'

Quirke nodded. 'Terrible. I was out, myself.'

Poole glanced back into the room behind him, looked up at Quirke again. 'It's the missus that minds,' he said, lowering his voice to a whisper, 'not me.' This was a new twist. Mrs Poole, rarely glimpsed, was a diminutive person with a furtive, frightened stare; she was, Quirke knew for

a fact, profoundly deaf. 'I've lodged a strong complaint. *I shall expect action*, I told them.'

'Good for you.'

Poole narrowed his eyes, suspecting irony. 'We'll see,' he said menacingly. 'We'll see.'

Quirke walked on up the stairs. He was at his own door before he heard Poole closing his.

Chill air stood unwelcoming in the living room, where the rain murmured against the two high windows, relics of a richer age, which no matter how dull the day were always somehow filled with a muted radiance Quirke found mysteriously dispiriting. He opened the lid of a silver cigarette box on the mantelpiece, but it was empty. He knelt on one knee and with difficulty lit the gas fire from the small flame of his cigarette lighter. With disgust he noted his dry raincoat, thrown over the back of an armchair, where it had been all the time. He rose to his feet too quickly and for a moment saw stars. When his vision cleared he was facing a photograph in a tortoise-shell frame on the mantelpiece: Mal Griffin, Sarah, himself at the age of twenty, and his future wife Delia laughingly pointing her racquet at the camera, all of them in tennis whites, walking forward arm in arm into a glare of sunlight. He realised with a faint shock that he could not remember where the picture had been taken; Boston, he supposed, it must have been Boston—but had they played tennis in Boston?

He took off his damp suit, put on a dressing-gown and sat down barefoot before the gas fire. He looked about the big, high-ceilinged room and grinned joylessly: his books, his prints, his Turkey carpet: his life. In the foothills of his

forties, he was a decade younger than the century. The nineteen fifties had promised a new age of prosperity and happiness for all; they were not living up to their promise. His eye settled on an artist's articulated wooden model, a foot high, standing on the low telephone table beside the window, its jointed limbs arranged in a prancing pose. He looked away, frowning, but then with a sigh of annoyance rose and went and twisted the figure into a stance of desolate abasement that would better suit his morning gloom and burgeoning hangover. He returned to the chair and sat down again. The rain ceased and there was silence but for the sibilant hiss of the gas-flame. His eyes scalded, they felt as if they had been boiled; he closed them, and shivered as the lids touched, imparting to each other along their inflamed edges a tiny, horrible kiss. Clearly in his mind he saw again that moment in the photograph: the grass, the sunlight, the great hot trees, and the four of them striding forward, young and svelte and smiling. Where was it? Where? And who had been behind the camera?