

Sanctuary

Ken Bruen

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Extract

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TRANSWORLD IRELAND

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‘For my own part, I believe no one on Earth
should be so happy as a nun.’

Dame Laurentia McLachlan, Benedictine nun

Part One

‘For now at least, all that was to come, and would come in its own delicious time. She would enjoy each minute of what was to come next, let it unfurl as slowly as she liked.’

Cathi Unsworth, *The Singer*

1

Benediction

Dear Mr Taylor,

Please forgive the formality. We'll progress to a more informal tone. Here is my shopping list – I know you like lists:

Two guards
One nun
One judge
And, alas, one child.

The latter is tragic but inevitable and certainly not negotiable.

But this you already know – the death of a child, I mean.

SANCTUARY

The list has already begun: see Garda Flynn,
deceased two days ago.

Only you will truly comprehend my mission.

You are to be my witness.

I remain, in benediction,

Benedictus

2

Bridge of Sighs

I was standing on the bridge that faces the Spanish Arch in Galway city and the rain was pelting down, drenching me to the core. Despite my all-weather coat, item 8234 of my former Guards issue, and a watch-cap pulled down over me forehead, I was soaked. And thinking.

Oh sweet Jesus, if only I could stop thinking.

I should have been in America – even better, down in Mexico, lying on a beach, cold beer on my mind and who knows, maybe a señorita? I certainly had the cash. Yeah, I'd sold my apartment and was sitting on my suitcase, waiting for the cab to the airport. Then the phone had rung.

Even now, I cursed myself for answering.

Ridge, in Irish Ni Iomaire, a female Guard and my partner in hostility and uneasy alliance for years, had been having tests for breast cancer. She was scared, not a thing she ever gave in to, and I was scared too, for her. It's God's own vicious joke, the only woman I managed to keep in my life was gay.

I put the phone to my ear and she had said one word.

'Malignant.'

Is there a more loaded, sinister one in the whole of the language?

I remembered the story about Joyce furiously ripping through a dictionary and Nora Barnacle asking, 'Aren't there enough words in there for you?' And he said, 'Yes, but not the right ones.'

What's the right word for a death sentence?

So I had stayed.

And every single day I was sorry.

Sorry is what I do if not best, certainly most frequently.

They'd removed Ridge's right breast and she was now two months along in recovery.

How does a woman recover from that?

She was out of hospital and recuperating at home, if recuperating means sitting in an armchair, listening to the kind of whining music they give free razor blades with, and drinking.

Yeah, Ridge, drinking. She'd busted my balls for years about my drinking and here she was, sinking into the abyss.

I tried to go round most days to see how she was doing and at first it was a bottle of dry sherry on the mantelpiece, then the bottle was on the coffee table, always getting nearer to reach, and now it was vodka.

First few times, I didn't mention it, especially as she was glaring at me, willing me to go for it.

I didn't.

But finally, a damp cold Monday, not yet noon and there she was, in her dressing gown, the bottle, near empty, perched on the arm of the chair.

'Need to watch that shite, it creeps up on you,' I said to her.

'That's priceless. The last of the real alkies telling me to *watch it*?' She stood up, went to the dresser, took out a pack of cigs, turned and with sheer brazenness lit one and blew the smoke in my direction.

Smoking? Another stick she'd beaten me with for so many years.

I was still wearing the patches and hadn't smoked for a long time. Her body language suggested she was ready for war.

Patience has never been one of my strong points. I asked, 'Like me to score you some coke? Then you'd have all my old habits down.'

Her eyes were slits of anger. 'I think I'd have a while

to catch up with you, Jack. I mean, how many are in the cemetery because of you?’

It hit me in the stomach like a knife. It was true.

Seeing my reaction, she faltered, tried, ‘Sorry, that was uncalled for. I didn’t mean . . .’

Was I letting her off the hook? Was I fuck. ‘Oh, you meant it, and if you carry on like this, you’ll be joining them,’ I lashed.

Did I do the childish thing of banging the door on my way out?

You betcha.

I limped down the road, ready to kill some bastard, adjusted my hearing aid, then turned it off. I’d heard enough for one day.

Hearing aid, limp, you’re wondering what kind of shape I was in?

Take a wild guess.

The limp was the result of a beating with a hurley, and my hearing had begun to fade in one ear. The specialist asked me, ‘Ever get a bang on the head?’ Count the ways.

Back on the bridge now.

I could see my beloved swans, so graceful. Sheer poetry to watch them glide on the water. I could just make out the Atlantic Ocean, and but a wish from there was my promised land, America.

The Spanish Arch, of course. Still intact, portal to

Long Walk and gateway to the Atlantic. Primarily, it acts as overseer to the old fishing village of the Claddagh and literally, as the line goes, 'Age has not withered its appeal.' The Virgin sits atop the arch, like a forlorn illusion of hope.

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It had come about a week before and contained a list of people the writer was going to kill: guards, a nun, a judge and, most frightening of all, a child. A whole series of questions jostled in my mind. How did this lunatic get my address? I'd have to check on that and it worried me, not just the disturbing letter but the psycho knowing where I lived. Should I get the locks changed? To say these thoughts preyed on my mind is understatement.

I phoned a guy in the Post Office named Sean. I did him a favour a time back and he'd said, 'You ever need anything, give me a call.'

He was friendly, as always, and pre-empted me with 'Jack, anything I can help you with?'

I said, 'I recently changed address and have got a letter from someone I don't know. How would that happen?'

He laughed. 'Easiest thing in the world, mate. We live in a world where information is readily available. Not just your address – if you follow the news you'll see they can find out your bank details nowadays, your credit rating, anything.'

Jesus, that was scary and I told him so.

He made a sound that carried all the implications of *'tell me about it'*. He said, 'Try working in the Post Office. Lots of people who've had your experience think we are responsible. But Jack, let's lower it a notch, to ease your concern.'

I'd love to hear how he intended to achieve that.

He continued, 'You have, let's face it, a high profile – all that stuff with the tinkers, the Magdalene Laundries, the priest, and just about everybody knows you. How hard would it be to follow you to wherever you live? You're not exactly invisible.'

This was lowering it a notch?

I said, 'Thanks, Sean. I appreciate it.'

'Glad to be of help. Just treat it like junk mail – dump it.'

Right.

I'd sworn I was out of the investigation business, but this was personal, or so the lunatic who wrote it implied. I had some choices.

I could just ignore it, or . . .

That *or* has been the curse of my life.

Earlier that morning, I had checked out the first guard mentioned and sure enough, a Garda Flynn had been killed in a hit and run just over a week ago. The letter-writer could be just using his death to lure me into a sick game, but my instinct told me it wasn't so. Despite Sean's reassurances,

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this Benedictus knowing where I lived was like an ominous cloud.

I was still staring at the water and a guy passing said, 'Jesus, jump or get off the frigging path.'

He wasn't working with the Samaritans, I guessed.