
Opening Extract from...

The Cold Cold Ground

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Now don't be a cry baby when there's wood in the shed,
There's a bird in the chimney and a stone in my bed,
When the road's washed out they pass the bottle around,
And wait in the arms of the cold cold ground.

– Tom Waits, "Cold Cold Ground", 1987

It is rumoured that after concluding his song about the war in Ilium, Homer sang next of the war between the frogs and rats.

– Jorge Luis Borges, "The Immortal", 1949

1: THE THIN BLUE LINE

The riot had taken on a beauty of its own now. Arcs of gasoline fire under the crescent moon. Crimson tracer in mystical parabolas. Phosphorescence from the barrels of plastic bullet guns. A distant yelling like that of men below decks in a torpedoed prison ship. The scarlet whoosh of Molotovs intersecting with exacting surfaces. Helicopters everywhere: their spotlights finding one another like lovers in the Afterlife.

And all this through a lens of oleaginous Belfast rain.

I watched with the others by the Land Rover on Knockagh Mountain. No one spoke. Words were inadequate. You needed a Picasso for this scene, not a poet.

The police and the rioters were arranged in two ragged fronts that ran across a dozen streets, the opposing sides illuminated by the flash of newsmen's cameras and the burning, petrol-filled milk bottles sent tumbling across the no man's land like votive offerings to the god of curves.

Sometimes one side charged and the two lines touched for a time before decoupling and returning to their original positions.

The smell was the stench of civilization: gunpowder, cordite, slow match, kerosene.

It was perfect.

It was *Giselle*.

It was *Swan Lake*.

And yet . . .

And yet we had the feeling that we had seen better.

In fact we had seen better only last week when, in the hospital wing of The Maze Prison, IRA commander Bobby Sands had finally popped his clogs.

Bobby was a local lad from Newtownabbey and a poster boy for the movement, having never killed anyone and coming from a mixed Protestant-Catholic background. And bearded, he was a good Jesus, which didn't hurt either.

Bobby Sands was the *maitreya*, the world teacher, the martyr who would redeem mankind through his suffering.

When Bobby finally died on the sixty-sixth day of his hunger strike the Catholic portions of the city had erupted with spontaneous anger and frustration.

But that was a week ago and Frankie Hughes, the second hunger striker to die, had none of Bobby's advantages. No one thought Frankie was Jesus. Frankie enjoyed killing and was very good at it. Frankie shed no tears over dead children. Not even for the cameras.

And the riots for his death felt somewhat . . . *orchestrated*.

Perhaps on the ground it seemed like the same chaos and maybe that's what they would print tomorrow in newspapers from Boston to Beijing . . . But up here on the Knockagh it was obvious that the peelers had the upper hand. The rioters had been cornered into a small western portion of the city between the hills and the Protestant estates. They faced a thousand full-time peelers, plus two or three hundred police reserve, another two hundred UDR and a battalion-strength unit of British Army regulars in close support. The Brits on this occasion were the Black Watch who, notoriously, were full of Glaswegian roughnecks looking for any chance of a rumble. There were hundreds of rioters – not the thousands that had been predicted: this hardly represented a general uprising of even the Catholic population and as for the promised "revolution" . . . well, not tonight.

"It looks bad," young Constable Price offered as a conversational opener.

"Ach, it's half-hearted at best for this lad," Detective Constable McCrabban replied in his harsh, sibilant, Ballymena-farmer accent.

"It's no fun being the second hunger striker to croak it. Everybody remembers the first one, number two is no good at all. They won't be writing folk songs for him," Sergeant McCallister agreed.

"What do you think, Duffy?" Constable Price asked me.

I shrugged. "Crabbie's right. It's never gonna be as big for number two. And the rain didn't help him."

"The rain?" McCallister said sceptically. "Forget the rain! It's the Pope. It was bad luck for Frankie to kick the bucket just a few hours before somebody tried to kill the Pope."

I'd done an analysis of Belfast riots from 1870–1970 which showed an inverse proportion between rain and rioting. The heavier the downpour the less likely there was to be trouble, but I kept my trap shut about that – nobody else up here had gone to University and there was no gain to be had from rubbing in my book-learning. And big Sergeant McCallister did have a point about John Paul II. It wasn't every news cycle that someone shot the Holy Father.

"He was a scumbag was Frankie Hughes. A rare 'un. It was his ASU that killed Will Gordon and his wee girl," Sergeant McCallister added.

"I thought it was the wee boy who was killed," McCrabban said.

"Nah. The wee boy lived. The bomb was in the car. The wee lad was severely injured. Will and his young daughter were blown to bits," McCallister explained.

There was a silence after that punctuated by a far-off discharge of baton rounds.

"Fenian bastards," Price said.

Sergeant McCallister cleared his throat. Price wondered

what that meant for a beat or two and then he remembered me.

"Oh, no offence, Duffy," he muttered, his thin lips and pinched face even thinner and pinchier.

"No offence, *Detective Sergeant* Duffy," Sergeant McCallister said to put the new constable in his place.

"No offence, Sergeant Duffy," Price repeated petulantly.

"None taken, son. I'd love to see things from your point of view but I can't get my head that far up my arse."

Everybody laughed and I used this as my exit line and went inside the Land Rover to read the *Belfast Telegraph*.

It was all about the Pope. His potential assassin was a man called Mehmed Ali Agca, a Turk, who had shot him in St Peter's Square. The *Telegraph* didn't have much more information at this stage but they padded out the story with the shocked opinions of local people and politicians and a few right-wing Protestant nuts, like Councillor George Seawright who felt that this was an "important blow against the Anti-Christ".

Sergeant McCallister poked his big puffy face and classic alky nose round the back of the Land Rover.

"You're not taking the huff at Price, are you, Sean?" he asked in a kindly manner.

"Jesus no. I was just getting out of the rain," I replied.

Sergeant McCallister grinned with relief. One of those infectious grins that I had not been blessed with myself. "That's good. Well, look, I was thinking, do you want to call it a day? No one is going to be needing us. They're more than covered down there in the riot. They've got redundancy in spades. Shall we bog off?"

"You're the senior sergeant. It's your call."

"I'll log us in to midnight, but we'll skip, what say you?"

"Alan, I think that's the most sensible thing I've heard since we bloody came up here."

On the way back down the mountain McCallister put a cassette in the player and we listened to his personal mix tape of Crystal Gayle, Tammy Wynette and Dolly Parton. They dropped

me first on Coronation Road, Carrickfergus. "Is this your new manor?" McCrabban asked, looking at the fresh paint job on number 113.

"Aye, I just moved in couple of weeks ago, no time yet for a house-warming party or anything," I said quickly.

"You own it?" Sergeant McCallister asked.

I nodded. Most people still rented in Victoria Estate, but a few people were buying their council houses from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive under Mrs Thatcher's privatization plans. I had bought the place vacant for only £10,000. (The family that had lived here had owed two year's rent and one night just upped and vanished. To America, some said, but nobody really knew.)

"You painted it pink?" Price asked with a grin.

"That's lavender, you colour-blind eejit," I said.

McCallister saw that Price clearly hadn't got the message yet. "Hey lads, you know why Price nearly failed the police entrance exam? He thought a polygon was a dead parrot."

The lads chuckled dutifully and somebody punched Price on the shoulder.

McCallister winked at me. "We have to head, mate," he announced and with that they closed the back doors of the Rover.

"See you!" I shouted after them as they drove off, but it was unlikely they heard me through the bulletproofing and armour plate.

I stood there looking ridiculous with my full riot gear, helmet and Sterling sub-machine gun.

A wee lad was gawping at me. "Is that a real gun, mister?" he asked.

"I certainly hope so," I said, opened my gate and walked down the garden path. It wasn't a bad house: a neat job in the middle of the terrace, built in the 1950s, like the rest of Victoria Estate, Carrickfergus for the Protestant working poor. Of course these days hardly anybody was working. The ICI textile plant had

closed last year, in the autumn of 1980, and they had employed one in every four men in Carrick. Now the town had an unemployment rate of twenty per cent and it would have been worse but for emigration to England and Australia and the brand new DeLorean factory that had just opened in Dunmurray. If people bought DeLoreans in anything like the numbers predicted then Carrickfergus and Northern Ireland had a chance. Otherwise . . .

"Busy night?" Mrs Campbell asked from next door.

Mrs Campbell . . . I smiled and said nothing. Best not to. She was trouble. Thirty-two. Red hair. Looker. Husband away on the North Sea oil rigs. Two weans under ten. There was no way.

"You know, what with the riots and everything?" she insisted while I hunted for my keys.

"Aye," I said.

"I suppose you heard about the Pope?"

"Yes."

"You could find about a dozen suspects on this street," she said with a cackle.

"I'm sure you could," I agreed.

"Personally, mind, I find it shocking, really shocking," she said.

I blinked a couple of times and looked straight ahead. This statement worried me. It meant that she was trying to show empathy, which led me to the inescapable conclusion that she probably fancied me and that she (and everybody else on the street) knew that I was a Catholic.

I hadn't been here three weeks, barely spoken to anyone. What had I done in this time to give myself away? Was it the way I pronounced the letter "H" or was it just that I was marginally less sour than Coronation Road's dour Protestant population?

I put the key in the lock, shook my head and went inside. I hung up my coat, took off my bulletproof vest and unbuckled the handgun. In case we'd been needed for riot duty I'd also

been issued with a CS gas canister, a billy club and that scary World War Two machine gun – presumably to deal with an IRA ambush en route. I carefully put all these weapons on the hall table.

I hung my helmet on the hook and went upstairs.

There were three bedrooms. I used two for storage and had taken the front one for myself as it was the biggest and came with a fireplace and a nice view across Coronation Road to the Antrim Hills beyond.

Victoria Estate lay at the edge of Carrickfergus and hence at the edge of the Greater Belfast Urban Area. Carrick was gradually being swallowed up by Belfast but for the moment it still possessed some individual character: a medieval town of 13,000 people with a small working harbour and a couple of now empty textile factories.

North of Coronation Road you were in the Irish countryside, south and east you were in the city. I liked that. I had a foot in both camps too. I'd been born in 1950 in Cushendun when that part of rural Northern Ireland was like another planet. No phones, no electricity, people still using horses to get around, peat for cooking and heating, and on Sundays some of the crazier Protestants rowing or sailing across the North Channel in little doreys to attend the kirk in Scotland.

Aye, I'd been whelped a country boy but in 1969, right as the Troubles were kicking off, I'd gone to Queen's University Belfast on a full scholarship to study psychology. I'd loved the city: its bars, its alleys, its character and, at least for a while, the university area was immune to the worst of the violence.

It was the era of Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson, and QUB was a little candle of light held up against the gathering dark.

And I'd done well there if I say so myself. Nobody was doing psychology in those days and I'd shone. Not much competition, I suppose, but still. I'd gained a first-class degree, fell in

and out of love a couple of times, published a little paper on the unreliability of eyewitness testimony in the *Irish Journal of Criminology* and perhaps I would have stayed an academic or gotten a job across the water but for the incident.

The incident.

Why I was here now. Why I'd joined the peelers in the first place.

I stripped off the last of my police uniform and hung it in the cupboard. Under all that webbing I had sweated like a Proddy at a High Mass, so I had a quick shower to rinse out the peeler stink. I dried myself and looked at my naked body in the mirror.

5' 10". 11 stone. Rangy, not muscled. Thirty years old but I looked thirty unlike my colleagues on sixty cigs a day. Dark complexion, dark curly hair, dark blue eyes. My nose was an un-Celtic aquiline and when I worked up a tan a few people initially took me as some kind of French or Spanish tourist (not that there were many of those rare birds in these times). As far as I could tell there wasn't a drop of French or Spanish blood in my background but there were always those dubious sounding local stories in Cushendun about survivors from the wreck of the Spanish Armada . . .

I counted the grey hairs.

Fourteen now.

I thought about the Serpico moustache. Again dismissed it.

I raised an eyebrow at myself. "Mrs Campbell, it must be awful lonely with your husband away on the North Sea . . ." I said, for some reason doing a Julio Iglesias impersonation.

"Oh, it's very lonely and my house is so cold . . ." Mrs Campbell replied.

I laughed and perhaps as a tribute to this mythical Iberian inheritance I sought out my Che Guevara T-shirt, which Jim Fitzpatrick had personally screenprinted for me. I found an old pair of jeans and my Adidas trainers. I lit the upstairs paraffin heater and went back downstairs.

I turned on the lights, went into the kitchen, took a pint glass from the freezer and filled it half full with lime juice. I added a few ice cubes and carried it to the front room: the good room, the living room, the lounge. For some arcane Proddy reason no one in Coronation Road used this room. It was where they kept the piano and the family Bible and the stiff chairs only to be brought out for important visitors like cops and ministers.

I had no toleration for any of that nonsense. I'd set up the TV and stereo in here and although I still had some decorating to do, I was pleased with what I'd achieved. I'd painted the walls a very un-Coronation Road Mediterranean blue and put up some original – mostly abstract – art that I'd got from the Polytech Design School. There was a bookcase filled with novels and art books and a chic looking lamp from Sweden. I had a whole scheme in mind. Not my scheme admittedly, but a scheme none the less. Two years back I'd stayed with Gresha, a friend from Cushendun, who had fled war-torn Ulster in the early '70s for New York City. She'd apparently become quite the professional little blagger and hanger-on, name-dropping Warhol, Ginsberg, Sontag. None of that had turned my head but I'd done a bit of experimenting and I'd gone apeshit for her pad on St Mark's Place; I imagine I had consciously tried to capture some of its aesthetic here. There were limits to what one could do in a terraced house in a Jaffa sink estate in far-flung Northern Ireland, however, but if you closed the curtains and turned up the music . . .

I topped off the pint glass with 80 proof Smirnoff vodka, stirred the drink and grabbed a book at random from the bookcase.

It was Jim Jones's *The Thin Red Line* which I'd read on my World War Two jag along with *Catch 22*, *The Naked and the Dead*, *Gravity's Rainbow* and so on. Every cop usually had a book going on for the waiting between trouble. I didn't have one at the moment and that was making me nervous. I skimmed through the dog-eared best bits until I found the section where

First Sergeant Welsh of C for Charlie Company just decides to stare at all the men on the troop ship for two full minutes, ignoring their questions and not caring if they thought he was crazy because he was the goddamned First Sergeant and he could do anything he bloody well wanted. Nice. Very nice.

That scene read, I turned on the box, checked that the Pope was still alive and switched to BBC2, which was showing some minor snooker tournament I hadn't previously heard of. I was just getting a little booze buzz going and quite enjoying the loose match between Alex Higgins and Cliff Thorburn (both them boys on their fifth pint of beer) when the phone rang.

I counted the rings. Seven, eight, nine. When it reached ten I went into the hall and waited for a couple more.

When it reached fifteen, I finally picked up the receiver.

"Aye?" I said suspiciously.

"There's good news and bad news," Chief Inspector Brennan said.

"What's the good news, sir?" I asked.

"It's nearby. You can walk from there."

"What's the bad news?"

"It's nasty."

I sighed. "Jesus. Not kids?"

"Not that kind of nasty."

"What kind of nasty, then?"

"They chopped one of his hands off."

"Lovely. Whereabouts?"

"The Barn Field near Taylor's Avenue. You know it?"

"Aye. Are you over there now?"

"I'm calling from a wee lady's house on Fairymount."

"A wee fairy lady?"

"Just get over here, ya eejit."

"I'll see you there in ten minutes, sir."

I hung up the phone. This is where the Serpico moustache would have come in handy. You could look at yourself in the hall

mirror, stroke the Serpico moustache and have a ponder.

Instead I rubbed my stubbly chin while I extemporized. Pretty nice timing for a murder, what with the riot in Belfast and the death of a hunger striker and the poor old Pope halfway between Heaven and Earth. It showed . . . What? Intelligence? Luck?

I grabbed my raincoat and opened the front door. Mrs Campbell was still standing there, nattering away to Mrs Bridewell, the neighbour on the other side.

"Are you away out again?" she asked. "Ach, there's no rest for the wicked, is there, eh?"

"Aye," I said with gravity.

She looked at me with her green eyes and flicked away the fag ash in her left hand. Something stirred down below.

"There's, uh, been a suspected murder on Taylor's Avenue, I'm away to take a gander," I said.

Both women looked suitably shocked which told me that for once in my police career I was actually ahead of the word on the street.

I left the women and walked down Coronation Road. The rain had become a drizzle and the night was calm – the acoustics so perfect that you could hear the plastic bullet guns all the way from the centre of Belfast.

I walked south past a bunch of sleekit wee muckers playing football with a patched volleyball. I felt sorry for them with all their fathers out of work. I said, hey, and kept going past the identical rows of terraces and the odd house which had been sold to its tenants and subsequently blossomed into window treatments, extensions and conservatories.

I turned right on Barn Road and cut through Victoria Primary School.

The new graffiti on the bike shed walls was jubilant about the Pope: "Turkey 1, Vatican City 0" and "Who Shot JP?" – a none too subtle *Dallas* reference.