

DOUBLE UGLY

Jim Murray

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One

Detective Sergeant Armand Burke saw life's mediocrity as a wilderness from which he yearned to escape, but try as he might he always awoke in the same Posture Perfect bed beside the same shamelessly snoring wife.

And so it was that he awoke one January morning – the wife snoring in one ear and the temple bells of his alarm clock in the other – and he thought: *Anything, the house to fall or even the World to end, just release me from this daily slog.*

Later that day he would reflect: *Be careful what you wish for, especially on your birthday.*

He stepped into the bathroom and as always the first thing he noticed was the small mole on the tip of his nose. He had had it all of his life and even still it surprised him.

He remarked to the mole: 'Thirty six today.'

It was perfectly uniform in colour, perfectly round and perfectly centred. If it had been a little to one side or irregular in shape, he was sure it wouldn't be nearly as disconcerting.

He ran his electric clippers over his neat black beard and the perfect dome of his head. *I am not a mole. I am first and foremost a handsome man with a beard and a buzz cut.*

He returned to the bedroom to dress. The dull spectrum of his shirts recalled to him the colourful clothes of his youth. Fifteen years in the Irish police force and his shirts had gone the way of his dreams: from Hawaiian to pale blue, grey and white.

He looked at his wife. She was leaving that morning to spend a few days with her mother in Donegal.

'Maeve.'

She mumbled something about crab grass.

'Maeve.'

'Wuh?'

‘Will you get up. You’ll miss your bus.’ He touched his lips to her cheek. ‘I’ve got to go to work.’

The Serious Crime Division occupied an entire floor of Garda Headquarters and was divided up by its various units. Armand was currently assigned to the Undercover and Surveillance Unit. When he arrived there were just two of his junior colleagues present: Detectives Alan Harris and Orla Quinn.

Harris greeted him: ‘Top of the morning to you, Sarge.’

‘And to you, Alan.’

Orla stood and gave him a hug. ‘Happy birthday, Armand.’

‘Thanks Orla.’

She handed him a birthday card. It had been signed by every member of the unit. It contained a lottery scratch card. He scratched it. ‘Nope, nothing.’

Armand spent the morning typing up yet another tobacco surveillance job – this one a total cock up. For the last few months Superintendent Flynn had him on secondment to Customs surveilling cigarette smugglers, protecting the half a billion the Government collects in duty each year.

When Harris offered to buy him lunch, he declined: ‘I’d like nothing more, Alan, but I’m in the middle of writing up that fiasco on the docks.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Harris grinned at Quinn, ‘Officer down! Officer down!’ It was the joke of the week: the assumption their Sarge had fallen asleep in the line of (tobacco) duty.

When he slammed the final full stop on the report, Armand reclined in his chair and he looked at the desk opposite – it had been empty for some weeks, its occupant playing the part of a courier for a North City drugs’ gang.

‘I’d kill for an infiltration role,’ he remarked to Orla. She was eating a sandwich at her desk.

‘So he’s still not having it? Flynn.’

‘No, and I’m blue in the face from asking. He insists I remain as the watching man in the parked car.’

‘I couldn’t do it,’ said Orla. ‘Work undercover. I wouldn’t have the nerve.’

‘It’s acting, that’s all. Before I became a policeman, I was an actor.’

‘No way.’

‘I was, yes.’ Armand caught himself; he sighed, ‘At least I was an aspiring one. I went to quite a few auditions but all I ever got were bit parts and some ads.’ He snorted in bitter amusement. ‘My crowning moment was one line of Yu–um – and that a voiceover – for a national cheese advertisement.’

‘Go on, say it.’

‘Yu-um.’

‘Brilliant.’

‘I *was* brilliant - still am. I just never got my break, and the wife agreed to marry me only if I gave up on my dream. She said: *Sure we’ll starve in a ditch at this rate*. She urged me to enrol in The Guards – the fact her father and uncles were staunch country inspectors.’

‘So you sold out!’

He paused. Should he tell her the truth? That in being a Guard he was still an actor: he was a heartless bastard playing the part of a good guy.

When Armand finished for the day, he was in a gloomy mood. As he trudged up the hill to his home he saw that Maeve had left the bedroom light on, and he thought that strange considering she was normally so careful about these things. *Of course!* The light was a beacon to guide him to his birthday present. He anticipated a new jacket laid out on the bed - that leather jacket he had recently admired - and the thought of it cheered him up.

And so it happened that Armand climbed the stairs of his home and he found a dead prostitute in his bed.

He had known the girl. Her name was Sondra. Had been. He had often encountered her at the corner of the park where she had stood

under the eaves of a cedar. He had seen her getting into cars. He had questioned her on a cold as brass night. She had explained to him she had two small daughters to clothe and feed - two champions of the Irish dancing circuit.

She was barely less white than the twisted sheets though her eyes were flushed with blood and her neck and cheeks were mottled with red spots. *Broken capillaries. Strangulation.* Her wrists were trussed to the bedstead by a strip of towelling – the belt from Maeve’s dressing gown. He pressed the back of his hand to her forehead. She had been dead for some hours.

He noted that there were no drag marks in the weft of the carpet, and that her jacket had been folded and placed on a chair. She had been killed here: In his bed; in full view of his wife’s reading glasses.

A pair of gloves lay by the bed. He recognised them by their specks of yellow paint. He assessed the situation: his home, his bed, his work gloves . . . if he were to allow a lag between discovery and disclosure that would give rise to further questions. Armand walked out to the front garden and he called it in.

Flynn led him along the aisle that divided the office. It had been ten years since he had first run that gauntlet – he’d been bumped up from uniform, and the floor had been in awe of his mole, his flowery shirt, and his fancy forename.

It had always been a hard name to overcome. His birth had coincided with the death of his maternal grandfather, Armand Bertonneau, and maddened by grief, his mother had joined the name Armand to the surname of Burke – the name she had taken from Armand’s father. Armand had always felt that it was not unlike hitching a dancing pony to a rag and bone cart.

‘So, Burke . . .’

Armand stared back at Flynn. They sat in a meeting room.

‘You’re really in the shit,’ said the junior detective who sat next to Flynn. He didn’t disguise his relish.

Flynn held up his hand to restrain his fellow interrogator. He continued to look at Armand.

Armand shrugged.

‘You taking the fifth here, Armand?’

‘No, I’m waiting for you to ask me a question.’

‘The junior detective blurted: ‘Tell us why you did it?’

‘*I didn’t* do it. I’ve been framed.’

Flynn sighed. ‘And who, Armand, would go to so much trouble to frame a lowly detective of erratic abilities?’

Armand ignored the insult. Insults were the stock and trade of Flynn. ‘I had been making certain enquiries, and I can only surmise that this was done as a warning.’

‘Armand, you are surveillance. You don’t make enquiries. Those few junkie touts you run – unregistered, I should stress – would feed you any old bull for a score of blow.’

‘But this girl . . . this isn’t bullshit,’ said Armand. ‘This is down to him. The capo di tutti capi.’

The younger detective gaped. He looked to Flynn. ‘The cup o’ what?’

‘The boss of bosses,’ said Flynn. ‘We have here a typical example of a policeman in mid-life crisis. A disillusioned policeman will begin to imagine that his life is like a Hollywood movie, and that all of Dublin crime is down to the one arch villain, and he is just the man to do combat with that evil mastermind and ultimately save the city. Meanwhile – as in Armand’s case - he will leave a trail of destruction in his crusade to save us all.’

Armand looked at the smirks of his interrogators and he suddenly saw this for what it was – Flynn indulging his own legend as a gas man altogether. Armand knew that Flynn and his lackeys would later knot together in the bar and laugh. This was sensational stuff for these half-wits.

Armand sighed, ‘OK, it’s true, there have only been indications about this criminal – hearsay and patterns – but they’ve insinuated a murdered prostitute into my bed. Who would do that? And *why*? It can only be because I got too close. And you have the report on that.

But of course . . .’ Armand sat back from the table and he studied his fingernails.

‘Of course what?’

‘Real police work gets ignored around here.’

Armand was referring the fiasco on the docks. He had been surveilling a container of contraband cigarettes that had been sitting on a truck in a holding area. While he was watching from the shadow of a gable wall, he noticed two cars approach along the dock and park beside a freighter. A man sat at the wheel of each car. Armand's scope lingered on one of the men. He knew him by the scar on his chin. He had seen him the previous year, prepping a team of armed robbers.

Armand watched as the day turned to dusk and then to darkness. Not once did he see the glow of a cigarette or one of the men emerge to take a leak. A cook appeared at the rail of the ship and he banged it with a metal bar. The men got out of their cars and walked up the gangplank. They re-appeared, roughly pushing two girls before them. Armand watched as they pushed the girls into the boot of a car. He pulled his Port Authority van from the shadows and he followed as they drove from the port.

As the container of cigarettes fell further behind, Armand began to worry. He knew that he should have stayed in position and called this in. He reached into the back of the van, but his radio lay beyond his fingertips.

When he had worn a uniform, his radio had been hooked to a buttonhole on his chest, and this had put him in the habit of keeping his mobile in his shirt pocket, but as he reached for it, the lead car began to indicate and Armand had to drop his hand to gear down and take a turn. He turned on to a side road that narrowed to a single lane as it passed under a railway bridge and the car with the girls continued on while the second car stopped, blocking pursuit.

Armand touched his forehead to the steering wheel. ‘Shit!’ he said.

He jumped from his car and he walked towards the stopped car. He pulled his pistol from its holster.

‘Out!’

A youth in a white tracksuit emerged, ‘I didn’t do nuthin’, mister. You can’t be pullin’ tha’ on me and accostin’ me, and me jus’ goin’ about me business.’

‘Who was driving that car?’

‘Wha’ car?’

‘I know who he is - your pal. You tell him I’ve seen him around, that I know he’s mixed up in a lot of stuff. You tell him Detective Burke is on to him. I’m on to your entire organisation. Is this your vehicle?’

‘Course it’s my vehicle. Name’s Francis Dillon, thirty two, Weighgate Street.’

Armand took the details down. He walked to the back of the car and he jotted down the registration. He wouldn’t run it. He knew it would check out, that this gobaloon was no doubt a petty criminal working his way up, but the fact was that Armand had nothing on him.

Armand returned his notebook to his pocket and he looked up and down the street till he was sure there were no people, cars or cameras. This kid was an accessory to the trafficking of women, and he believed he was going to walk away, scot free. Armand pulled his arm back and landed a punch on the kid’s nose. Francis Dillon slid down the side of his car.

Armand returned to his van and he called in the description of the first car: possible abduction, suspect driving an Audi A6, dark coloured, possibly black, reg not attained, heading North West. The dispatcher sighed. She drawled: ‘Sure I’ll put it out there anyway.’ Armand’s priority now was to high tail it back to the docks and hope to hell the container hadn’t moved.

‘I’m the one policeman who got wind of these guys, and they knew I wouldn’t stop, not till I took them apart, so they did the only thing they could – rather than kill me, which I hope would have raised all sorts of questions, they set out to discredit me.’

‘Very interesting, Sherlock,’ remarked the junior detective.

Flynn looked up from a contemplation of the table top. He looked at Armand. The junior detective had been on the nose with that jibe. Armand desperately wanted to be seen as a latter day Sherlock Holmes. He had kept up the acting classes and he had taken online courses in investigative science, and almost every week he had put in for transfers, promotions and undercover jobs.

It perplexed Flynn that Armand could be blind to the handicap his mole presented. Before long he'd be recognised by some scumbag he had interrogated or testified against. But Armand Burke wasn't a man to be hindered by his limitations.

When the post of Superintendent had become available, it was a shoo-in for Flynn – he had been an Inspector for several years and he had already been assigned the role of acting Superintendent. For all that, and regardless of the fact he had served only a few months as Sergeant, Armand had made a bizarre grab for it.

The Chief Superintendent, puzzled by the lack of qualifying criteria, had gawped at Armand and demanded: 'Why in the name of God do you think you should be a Superintendent?'

And Armand had said: 'Because I would set an intellectual and professional standard that would make the Irish police force the envy of the world.'

Flynn twirled his empty polystyrene cup on the table and he yawned. He was tired. What he craved was a night's sleep in his old bed – in the bosom of his old certainties.

Flynn had married a difficult woman: at times a very difficult woman. Nevertheless, he had made it work, usually by appeasement. *There will be marriage in our time!* He had worked at their marriage for ten years and then she left him for the treasurer of her golf club. In one terrible evening two months since, Flynn had lost his wife and his home. He had gone to his sister's, had lain on her spare bed and he had wondered if he wasn't much of a detective after all, the fact that Flaherty had been surreptitiously banging his wife for three years.

He was far too tired for Armand Burke. He stood. 'Ok, gentlemen, let's take a bit of a breather.'

When they left the room, Flynn signalled to an Inspector Ed Murphy to join them in an adjoining room. The three men sat around a table.

‘Ed, I want you to take over on this.’

‘Very well. So what’s the feeling?’

‘I don’t know. He’s a hard man to wear down.’

‘Do you think he did it?’ Ed asked.

‘I’m not sure, maybe.’

‘I do,’ piped the junior detective.

Flynn arched an eyebrow.

‘Come on, Boss, he’s like . . . he’s got this arrogant air about him . . . and I think he’s guilty. Sure he has to be.’

‘Is that so? You’re to write in your copy book, twenty times - we don’t condemn a man based on impressions. Do we, Ed?’

‘We do not.’

‘And if you’d known Armand for as long as Ed and I have . . .’

‘You’d know he’s a very brave and dedicated policeman.’

‘Exactly,’ said Flynn, ‘Now I’m sure we could all do with some coffees, so be a trooper and fetch us in some.’

When the junior detective left, Ed looked at Flynn. ‘Well?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘He’s not the type to show his guilt,’ observed Ed. ‘He’s a cool customer. Dangerous too. I tell you, I’ll be going in there with some prejudice. This murder – I wouldn’t put it past him.’

‘Yeah,’ said Flynn, ‘But I’ve known Armand from way back. We served together in uniform before we transferred over.’

‘Your point?’

‘I’ve observed him, and I’ve learnt something of the man. In the absence of a natural morality, he appears to have developed some moderating traits.’

‘You think? He’s a temper, though. I’ve seen it.’

‘Sure, he can be angry in certain situations, as he has been at being held back, but Sondra Murphy wasn’t killed by an angry man – there were no cuts or contusions to indicate a beating.’

‘But we agree he’s a loose cannon?’

Flynn nodded. 'He said to me once – and mind you, he saw no irony in saying it: *I will always uphold the law, even if I have to break it to do so.*'

Ed laughed, 'No-one will ever accuse our Armand of being dull.'

'And I have to say it's been tempting to give the man some leash – his methods might be unorthodox but he's been a terror to the gang bangers and scumbags.'

'Sure just the other day, he stabbed the tyres and scratched the paintwork on a brand new Hummer. Harris was saying it around the office.'

'I heard,' said Flynn.'

'Not to mention the arson and the beatings and the fact he instigated a shooting war between two gangs by telling one that the other had a hit on them.'

'I know, I know, and it was getting out of hand, Ed – it really was - but I'm not the type to fire a man.'

'So you did the next worst thing. You transferred him to surveillance.'

'To Customs, yes. I realised smuggling doesn't tend to provoke his righteous ire and retribution.'

'And then he goes and loses a container of cigarettes.'

Flynn shook his head. He couldn't help but smile. 'Like you said – it's never dull.'

The men allowed a silence.

'He's been far from happy protecting our shores from Vietnamese cigarettes,' Flynn said. 'As it happens, he recently interviewed for the Armed Response Unit.'

'Lord help us.'

'I know. I have the results on my desk. Seems they took a dim view of the man. While he scored well in some areas, he bombed it in others. He's a keen shot and he reacts quickly and decisively. However, the tests proved he'll kill without remorse. Even when it was put to him that he had accidentally killed an innocent bystander, Armand simply shrugged it off. And while we know that kind of work doesn't require an excessive amount of moral restraint, it does require some.'

‘So he’s basically a psychopath,’ observed Ed.

‘Basically, but it takes a different class of sociopath to do what was done to that girl, the type of killer who betrays a shifty admission in his body language and in the furtive lusts of his eyes. I don’t see any of that in Armand’s demeanour. I never have.’

Ed sat back in his chair and smiled, ‘You’re trying to convince yourself he’s innocent.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Don’t get me wrong, Boss - I do like Armand and I’d love to say he didn’t do it, but he’s pretty much the type. I’ll be coming out of that room with a confession, you’ll see.’

There was a knock at the door. A detective waved an envelope at the window. Flynn excused himself and he stepped out. ‘Well?’

‘Forensics, initial report.’

When Inspector Ed Murphy and the junior detective entered the interrogation room, Ed laid the coroner’s report on the table. ‘Looks like we’ve only the one set of prints on the inside of those gloves. Yours, Armand.’

‘Well then the killer pulled my gloves on over his own.’

‘You watch a lot of CSI?’ asked the junior detective.

Armand ignored him. He looked at Ed. ‘It’s in Flynn’s notes. I had an exchange of words with a Francis Dillon, and he went to his gangland boss with my threats. This was their answer - they did this to get me off their case.’

Regardless of Armand’s pleas and demeanour, Ed subjected him to six hours of a gruelling interrogation.

‘Where were you in the hour and a half since you left work and called in the murder?’

‘I told you. I bought a burrito.’

‘Where?’

‘It’s there in your notes. You’ve scribbled the name of it.’

‘Where Armand?’

‘It’s the place on the lane that leads from Drury Street to South William. I had a burrito, and after that I stopped into Nearys for a small Guinness. I then spent some time perusing the history section

of that book shop on Grafton Street. I leafed through a book of vignettes from Roman history. One thing in particular that I recall – Caligula selected men for a random execution by pointing to a queue for bread and selecting all of the people from one bald man to another.’

The interrogators rolled their eyes, ‘What bookshop?’

‘Dubray Books.’

And on it went, till Ed would circle back and demand: ‘Where were you in the hour and a half since you left work and called in the murder?’

Armand knew that no Irish police man would strap a suspect to a board and dunk him in water; rather, he would beat his man with a question, interminably asked. Either way, it amounted to torture, and Armand reached a point when he could no longer endure it. His breath shortened and he felt a startling sensation. He slumped to the floor and he stared at the confused eyes of his interrogators. Before he passed out he heard the junior detective exclaim: ‘His lips . . . they’re gone blue.’

Armand regained a few seconds of consciousness and he saw he was in an ambulance. He was hooked to a machine and a medic was shouting for the driver to drive.

When he next opened his eyes he was in a hospital and the doctors were using crash pads on him. A voice insisted that there’s no point in lying to the man, and a woman’s face loomed over and she said: ‘Sir, you are having a heart attack and it is serious.’

Armand closed his eyes and it surprised him that he didn’t feel any regret. He let the doctors and nurses get on with it. If they saved him, so be it. If not—’

A man said: ‘Put him under.’

When Armand came around, a nurse in a green hat was looking intently at his face and a surgeon came over, still pulling a bloodied glove from her hand.

Armand closed his eyes, and when he again opened them he was moving and beads of illumination were passing overhead and he

realised that he was being wheeled along a corridor. People he couldn't see manoeuvred him into a room. They left him there, and Armand lay listening to his breath and to the banter and laughter of doctors, nurses and porters as they encountered each other in the corridor.

Sir, you are having a heart attack and it is serious.

He found his way to the pain in his chest, and his mind followed the line of it from his throat to his sternum. A doctor appeared and she told him that an x-ray had revealed that he had an enlarged heart. She told Armand that they had also spotted an irregular heartbeat, and she explained that his heart had been slowing to nothing and starting again and they had feared he was at risk of another, and possibly fatal, heart attack. They had fit him with a defibrillator to shock his heart back into action should it stop, and after an operation to insert the device, it was slowed to test it but then it stopped altogether.

The doctor patted his hand and she told him he would remain plugged in to machinery to keep him alive while the hunt for a donor heart began. She paused in the doorway and added: 'You might be interested to know that you actually died on the operating table – you were dead for a full minute.'

Armand lay in the bed and he looked through the rain streaked window at the puddled tar roofs of the buildings below. He looked at the wasted people who wheeled their drips past his door. And he listened to the transplant nurses and the psychologists who rotated by his bed, urging him to endure, to live.

Detective Orla Quinn came through the door.

'Sarge, hi.'

'Orla. You're my first visitor.'

'I shouldn't be here. We were told to stay away, but the lads thought . . . we thought . . .'

'Flynn had me killed, Orla. I actually died.'

'But you're OK now.' She sat.

'Hardly.' He blew out some air. 'Sure look at me,' he demanded, deflated. 'I'm destroyed. I'm done in.'

‘Don’t even talk like that, Sarge.’

‘Do you believe I’m innocent?’

‘Of course. I’m sure we all do.’

‘Do you think they would have given me a Garda funeral - if they might yet? The fact Flynn thinks I’m guilty?’

‘Armand, please.’

‘I’ve been imagining my eulogy: we are gathered here today to remember Armand, the murderer. He might have been a great detective, given the chance. He might have been a great actor, given the chance.’

Orla stood. ‘I have to—’

‘I’m sorry, Orla. I’m being a frightening bore. Thanks for coming. Really.’

‘That’s alright.’

‘So what are they saying?’

‘Flynn? Murphy? For the moment it’s you, Armand – you’re their only line of enquiry.’

‘Idiots.’

‘In fairness, though, who would have done such a thing? Where’s the motive, the sense to it?’

‘There’s a man—’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘Don’t tell me.’ She zipped her jacket. ‘Don’t implicate me.’

‘Orla? Are you quite sure you believe me?’

Her mobile rang. She looked relieved. ‘I’ve got to get this. I’m so sorry.’

When Orla left, Armand was angry for a moment and then he dozed.

He opened his eyes to see his adopted daughter standing by the bed. ‘Hi Daddy.’

‘Margaret.’

‘Mammy will be along shortly. She’s fixing her make-up.’

Maeve heralded her arrival with a honk. She stepped from behind a wad of tissues. ‘Our bed? Why? What . . .?’

‘It was nothing to do with me.’

‘But they seem to think you did it,’ Margaret said.

‘If they really thought I did it, I’d be under arrest and there would be a man on that door.’ Armand pointed to the door. He saw that Margaret’s step children had hesitated in the corridor. ‘It was a set up.’

Maeve slumped in the chair, and Margaret stood half turned as if to leave, and Armand sagged in his pillows and he understood that there could be no terror for his condition: after fifteen years of tectonic separation, there lay an emotional chasm in the small gap between them.

He didn’t blame them - the drift had been on his side. His emotional thermostat was stuck on cold. Although he didn’t particularly mind - in fact he had always been rather proud of his level emotions: it wasn’t for him to lay awake at night suffering anxiety, or succumb to grief at a funeral. He was a cool customer, a good man in a crisis, and to Armand’s mind these were the qualities of a hero. He made fists of his hands. He squeezed them: there was little strength there.

A hero? Really?

Hardly.

Margaret’s visit was quick and abstracted - she had to go: *The kids* - while Maeve eventually perked up a bit. She sat by the bed and read him essays from her creative writing class.

This was a torture to Armand. ‘A book in everyone,’ he grumbled. ‘Sure you lot are ruining it for real writers. Remember how some years ago you and your friends got giddy for antique restoration, how you stripped the patina from many fine antiques? Remember that? All of the mahogany furniture you murdered? You’ll do the same to literature.’

Maeve only raised her eyebrows at the word *murdered*. She flipped the cover on her folder, and said: ‘But I think this is good. I wrote it a few weeks ago, before . . .’ She cleared her throat. ‘It is titled *My Day*, and it is all about—’

‘Your day.’

‘I usually wake with the birds and I like to stay in the warm bed and listen to the orchestra in my garden. The wren raises his beak to

the sky and I admire him for his song that is so much bigger than he is. The blackbird trills. The wood pigeon strums his bass guitar . . .’

Armand watched the old matron go by. His eyes followed the pink H’s on the backs of her knees. *Heil Hitler*, he thought.

‘Armand is often grumpy in the morning. Margaret says that he might suffer from low blood sugar. And there’s barely a word at all out of him, not until he has his coffee with cream and seven sugars.’

The thing that really bothered Armand was that this woman, having killed off his own dreams, aspired to be the artist in their marriage. These last months, she had been tapping away on the keyboard - tap, tap, tap - and Armand had the impression of a bony knuckle knocking, that of a ghost, and it seemed to call: *Armand, Armand, I am your murdered talent.*

Flynn had been ploughing a slice of fragmented toast from his toaster when Inspector Ed Murphy called.

‘Armand collapsed. He was taken to hospital in an ambulance.’

Flynn watched his knuckles whiten on the fork. It was a common ruse with suspects: palpitations or respiratory problems, then off to hospital for a breather, and they’d be back the following day with their story straight.

‘He’s doing the opossum,’ Flynn said.

‘Excuse me?’

‘When threatened, the opossum collapses to the ground, drools as though very ill, and then remains motionless, its teeth bared in a grimace of death. It even produces a corpse-like smell from its anal glands.’

‘It looked genuine, Boss, unless he really is a good actor.’

‘So it *was* genuine. Heart? Stroke?’

‘He clutched his chest.’

Flynn pondered his jigsaw of toast.

‘Boss?’

‘I’m here. I’m just thinking of the effort we spent trying to wear the man down, and now we’ll have to start again. I’m not liking this case at all. Any word from the door to door?’

‘Nothing.’

‘No granny in a window?’

‘There was one old dear up the street, but she only saw Armand and his missus leave in the morning, and Armand come back in the evening. Then all the commotion.’

‘And she saw nothing unusual on the road?’

‘Two little tykes on bikes scoping cars, but they didn’t do anything.’

‘Yeah, but they would have had her undivided attention. And I’m sure she regularly toddled back to her kitchen for tea and Digestives. Armand could well have slipped home with the victim. Still, a witness would be a fine thing.’

‘Do you want to know what I think?’

‘What?’ asked Flynn.

‘I think we arrest Armand. Charge him with first degree. Turn the interrogation into a negotiation. He might start talking if we offer him manslaughter.’

‘We will, maybe, once we have the forensics and CCTV. First though, we’ll need to resume questioning. Call the hospital and call me back.’

When Ed called back and told Flynn that Armand was on the hot list for a heart transplant, Flynn placed his mobile on the kitchen counter and he wondered if he hadn’t just been gazumped by an avenging god.

When a donor heart became available it was a shake up between Armand and one other man. They were both tested and Armand was deemed eligible. If Maeve hadn’t been sitting by the bed, squeezing his hand, Armand would have asked the doctor to give it to the other man; and if not to him, the cat.

Within minutes Armand was having his chest swabbed and he was being prepped for the operation.

Armand became aware of people and sounds around him, though for a time the people were distorted and the sounds were muffled. He understood that men and women were giving each other instructions and updates, though he wasn’t sure why.

A nurse stood over him. She said: ‘Your operation is done, Armand.’

‘Operation?’

‘Your heart. You have a new heart.’

Armand lost consciousness again. When he opened his eyes, he became dimly aware of his surroundings: he was alone in a white room. He was attached to a lot of tubes and machines. He was very sore. He brought his fingertips to his chest. The terrain felt foreign to him, ridged. It was thickly bandaged above a spine of clamps.

Armand lay listening to the chirp of his new heart on the monitor. It took him a long time till he could steer his mind to its presence, till he could dip in and rummage for its capacities. He wondered if he might now be capable of a soaring love – if he might look at Maeve and feel the emotions he had once professed but had never been able to express. That is, if he might yet love her.

At best, Armand had only ever been infatuated by Maeve’s beauty – its prize. There were many men who had wanted her, yet he had been the winner: he had married her.

They were only twenty one – she had become pregnant and Armand had insisted on doing the right thing.

And anyway, as he had said to her at the time, *why the hell not?* He was dancing along a low wall, swaying and teetering as if he were walking a tightrope.

We’ve no money, Armand. You’ve no job.

He jumped down from the wall and he grabbed her hands: *But we are gorgeous. Together, we will turn so many heads. And imagine our children! They will be gods, goddesses!*

Armand blinked at the strips of neon. He had been a fool - he had married Maeve for her beauty and while his betrothed had died a slow death, a frowsty fussing woman had gradually emerged.

A figure appeared beside his bed. She told him that the operation had been a success. Armand tried to focus. *Who was it? Was it Maeve?*

‘Would you like to hold my hand?’ she asked.

‘I suppose so.’

She placed something in his hands. It had a cold meat clamminess and the heft of a baby.

Armand suddenly understood that the woman was a doctor and she had asked him if he would like to hold his heart. 'Oh God, no!' 'Oh dear.'

Armand felt his old heart peeling from his palms.

'I'm *so* sorry,' said the Doctor.

He bunched the bedsheets in his fists and he suffered a wave of grief that threatened to dislodge his mind and carry it away.

When their son, Conor, had died at birth, Maeve had been swept into the care of her mother and her sister. Armand, on the other hand, had parked out on the seafront. He had stared at the yellow rollers and he had felt no grief. There was only a mild shame for his defective chromosomes. At one point, a Volkswagen Camper had pulled in to the car park and a sticker on its rear had taunted Armand with the imperative to *Make art or Make babies*.

He got out of his car and he sat next to an old lady on a bench. He stared at the docks - its blocks and drums - and he explained to the lady that his wife had given birth to a son.

'Just yesterday. And the midwife, she placed his small dead body in my hands. Born sleeping, she whispered as if afraid to wake him. And I looked at his face and I felt nothing.'

The old lady mumbled an excuse and she shuffled away, and Armand checked his watch and wondered if it wasn't too early for lunch.

A nurse squeezed Armand's hand. 'You're crying, Mister Burke.' She went away and another person appeared. She said that she was a psychologist. She stood away from the bed and she spoke to Armand through a mask. She asked him what he was feeling.

He didn't answer and she went away. The nurse returned and she told him to be calm, that he must avoid hypertension; she told him that his family would visit in a few days when the risk of infection had diminished. Another nurse appeared with a mobile phone, one

that smelled of disinfectant. She pressed it to Armand's ear. Maeve's voice said: 'Hello?'

Armand sobbed. 'Conor.'

'Armand. Oh, Armand.

'I'm alright.'

'Thank God.'

'I'll see you soon.' He nodded to the nurse and she took the phone away.

Armand was moved to the High Dependency Ward where he was at all times propped in a half sitting position. He sat in that posture, his head fogged from morphine, when he imagined he saw a presence lurching towards him. He closed his eyes to blink it away. When he opened them there appeared to be an Egyptian Mummy standing by his bed.

Armand gradually began to separate a man from the apparition – rather than these being the outstretched arms of an ancient avenging mummy, they were in fact the broken arms of a young man, each of them extended by immobilisers.

The man lurched at the wires and tubes which tethered Armand to his machines. He closed his teeth on a tube. 'Ach!' he spat, and he disappeared with a cry.

Armand pushed the button for the nurse.

She came padding into the room. 'Is there something the matter?'

'There is an assassin. He appears to have bitten on the catheter that is draining my bladder. He's there on the floor.'

She went around to the other side of the bed. 'What the hell are you doing here?'

'Nuthin. I'm not doin' nuthin'.'

She tugged at his wrist band and read it, 'Mister Barry Murphy
'Come on. Up. Let's get you returned to your ward.'

Within a week of the operation, Armand was walking the corridors. Within two weeks, he was well enough to go home. The doctor stood by his bed and he said: 'Think of a tennis ball. Now imagine squeezing that tennis ball as hard as you can. That is the power of a

contraction and your heart will do that one hundred thousand times a day. And the fact is that most people know nor care nothing about the heart, not until something goes wrong. So treat it well, Armand. Stick to your recovery regime, and you must—’ the doctor looked to Maeve, ‘I really cannot emphasise this enough. Armand *must* avoid stressful situations.’

‘I’m afraid that’s impossible,’ said Armand. ‘My spiteful boss did this to me, and as I remain a witness to murder, he will haul me in again to ask me questions I have already answered a thousand times. He’ll have me back in here, you’ll see.’

‘There’s no chance that one antagonistic man can have destroyed your heart. It was undone by a congenital defect compounded by the bacon sandwiches that sustained you through your surveillance shifts. If your boss has been guilty of anything, he only hastened the inevitable collapse of an unsound heart.’

Flynn sat in his office mulling the notes from Armand Burke’s interrogation. In the absence of a smoking gun breakthrough, he ended up arranging them by chronology and then shuffling them to a neat tower. There was a knock at his door.

‘Yes.’

Inspector Ed Murphy entered.

‘We have word back on Burke’s girl.’ Ed placed a coroner’s report on Flynn’s desk. ‘The ETD was noon of that day. Turns out he was at his desk all day, even through lunch, and we have him on an in bus camera at six pm. And there’s also his mobile.’

‘What about it?’

‘We have it pinging a tower down the street here.’

‘And there was no chance she was killed any earlier than . . . what was it?’ Flynn glanced at the coroner’s report, ‘between eleven and one that day?’

‘I asked. None.’

When Ed left, Flynn leaned back in his chair and he entwined his fingers behind his head. He stared at the panels of the ceiling and he felt relief that Armand had not killed the girl. His relief was quickly

replaced by frustration: there were no leads. Her fella – Baz – was off the radar which would be perfect if this case wasn't so mental. The normal course would be the hooker is found strangled in the crummy bedsit she shares with her boyfriend pimp. It would then be a straightforward matter of apprehending the boyfriend and coaxing a confession. As it happened she had been murdered in Sergeant Armand Burke's bed, so the next simplest answer would have been that Armand had sneaked a prostitute into his home, that she had laughed at his floppy dick, thus triggering a surge of murderous anger based on a repressed sense of inadequacy and a hatred for women. If Armand hadn't been at his desk all day and if this girl had indeed been killed in anger, it would have been a textbook case.

Flynn wondered what the next simplest answer might be. He didn't know. This case was bordering on the metaphysical; an almost likely explanation was that her body had tumbled through the membrane of some parallel Universe and landed in – of all people – Armand Burke's bed.

Flynn looked again at the interrogation notes. He fanned the pile till he came to a page with a section he had bracketed in yellow highlighter. It was Armand's mention of the guy who had blocked him under the bridge. Flynn read the section:

Witness: When you balled me out for having gone to the rescue of those two daughters, I was horrified. Well not being in a position to defend myself against your rank, I decided to squeeze that stick of celery for the name of the driver of the first car.

Det. Sup. Flynn: Stick of celery?

Witness: That idiot with the enormous Adam's apple who blocked my pursuit. I supposed if I could get the name of the driver of the first car, I could get a bit closer to the centre of this operation. I found the half-wit hanging with his homeys at a row of shops – the usual mix of tracksuits and sebum. They were all hyped up on their bottles of Bucky, and my man bouncing like a prize fighter. I pushed him in to the car and told him I would put him on the sex offenders list and broadcast it around town. That deflated his act. Told him I needed something, anything, if he wanted me off his back. I asked

him about the other driver, the organisation, the main boss. His Adam's apple was jumping like a hamster in a tennis sock. He cried that I would get him killed. He didn't give me anything, but the most telling thing was he didn't deny a single one of my assumptions.

Flynn had inserted 'the stick of celery's' name and address under the transcript: Francis "Dilly" Dillon, Thirty two Weighgate Street. It hardly had the makings of a simple answer – more like the most convoluted and far-fetched of answers - but Flynn decided he would pay the boy a visit nonetheless.

Two

Flynn knocked on the door of Thirty two Weighgate Street. It was pulled open by a heavy woman in a pink dressing gown.

‘Yeah?’

Flynn held up his badge. ‘Detective Superintendent Donal Flynn.’

‘Finally.’

‘Sorry?’

‘One of youse lot takin’ me serious. There’s no way my Francis woulda lain out in tha’ bush in nuthin’ but his ‘T’ and an inch o’ frost on the ground. No matter how messed up he got he’d always come home to his ’lectric blanket. And to lose his jacket and runners. Never. He’d only robbed them trainers new. And if they was robbed off o’ him, well why was there his money and his phone left in his pants? They set him up to die o’ that hyper termia.’

‘Who did?’

‘Are you for real?’ She slammed the door. ‘You’re the detective!’

Flynn returned to his car and he made a call to the coroners. He asked if they had brought in a body by the name of Francis Dillon in the last few weeks. They had. He’d been found in a church yard by a dog walker. Hypothermia – sleeping off a drunk in sub-zero temperatures. Flynn thanked the coroner’s assistant and hung up. Whatever had happened to Dillon, Flynn knew it would be marked down to that moniker for idiocy – misadventure.

When the doctor moved on to his next patient, Armand sat on the chair beside his bed while Maeve packed and zipped his case.

‘There’s one more thing,’ she said. ‘She pulled her creative writing folder from her bag.’

‘No!’ cried Armand.

‘It’s important.’ She sat on the edge of the bed and she coughed to clear her throat: ‘I was profoundly disturbed by the dead girl being found in my bed and the subsequent interrogation of my husband - if

not for the cold slap of Armand's heart failure I honestly might have had a nervous breakdown.

It had only been when Armand was so lucky to get a heart, and as he recovered his strength in the ICU unit, that I began to despair that I had lost my home. *Such are humans!* Rather than be relieved enough to be happy in sack cloth, I was already lamenting my curtains and my quilted bedspread. And I've been feeling so terribly guilty about that – there was a dead girl, a mother. But I've been numb to her loss. It is too big, too horrifying, and my mind can't close on the tragedy of it. For now at least, I can only deal with my own loss.

I had always thought of our bedroom as a vital and beloved part of me, but that part has been violently twisted and now transmits only pain to my mind. In a phone call – in the transition from disbelief to acceptance and horror – the hundred little aspects of that room that had always greeted me with a warming hug became accessory to a murder. My Laura Ashley curtains – they had hung their pelmet and stared. My Louis Dainault dressing table – its lozenge of glass had reflected the abomination. Even my clothes had peeped from the open closet. The girl's breath had touched their fabric – I'm sure it clings to it still. And the carpet, the walls, the ceiling inhaled that scene and hold it yet, and will hold it for so long as the house stands.'

Maeve closed the folder and she stared at Armand.

'Jesus,' he said, 'you must be a big hit in that class.'

'I'm not going back there, Armand. I can't. Margaret has made up their spare room for us.'

Armand climbed the stairs of his daughter's house. He stopped half way for a rest, and to study Ambrose's atrocious painting of Jesus. *A Roswell alien with a beard*, he thought. He lay on the bed in the guest room and he slept for an hour. The ringing of his mobile woke him. He looked at the screen. It was the office.

'What?'

'It's me, Flynn.'

'What do *you* want?'

‘How are you?’

‘Heal me to hang me – that’s your attitude. Your suspect is fine.’

‘You’re no longer a suspect. Not for the murder anyway. You were picked up by an in bus camera way after the ETD.’

A tautness eased from Armand. ‘Well for exactly what then am I still a suspect?’ he asked.

‘We can’t rule out complicity. Not yet.’

‘But you agree I didn’t kill her?’

‘Yes. At least not with your own hands.’

‘Are you prepared to consider the possibility that I had nothing to do with it?’

Flynn didn’t say anything.

‘The possibility that someone tried to frame me? And since then, they have tried to kill me, though heaven only knows why a criminal mastermind would send such a banjaxed assassin. Here’s your first break in this case, Detective. Barry Murphy. He is currently residing in a bed in the Misericordia. You might ask him who he is and why he tried to kill me in the recovery ward.’

A summons came up the stairs: ‘Daddy can you come down here please.’

‘I have to go.’ Armand hung up.

Armand found his wife and daughter in the living room, their hands churning on their laps. Ambrose rattled in with a tray bearing a china teapot and four cups and he placed it on a small table. He looked grim.

Idiot, thought Armand. To Armand’s mind, his son-in-law made himself up as he went along. For now he was a disappointed man squaring up to an unpleasant task.

Ambrose took the seat beside Margaret. He gave her knee a squeeze. The gesture was supposed to say: *I’m here for you*.

Armand wrestled with an inclination to punch the man. Everything about Ambrose infuriated him: the fact he hollowed out many of his sentences with a hesitant ‘um’; and the fact he was older than Armand, yet he insisted on calling Armand, Dad.

The three of them sat the other side of the coffee table and stared. Armand exhaled. ‘Alright then . . .’

‘Daddy, I need you to swear on everything you value – and I can only hope that includes me and Mum – that you had nothing to do with that woman being in the bed.’

‘I’ve told you, Margaret.’

‘Tell us again.’

‘There was absolutely nothing. My section was stepping on the toes of a very serious criminal and this was his warning for us to back off. I was in the office all day, and when I came home, there she was – the woman - dead.’

Ambrose looked at Margaret, ‘But then why was he being interrogated, Margey?’

‘Yes Daddy, why were you being interrogated?’

‘It’s process.’

‘They thought you killed her.’

‘No,’ he snapped, and then he said in softer voice: ‘No, Margaret. They never thought that.’

‘Then why . . .?’

‘It had to be that way. They were doing what it takes to rule me out. And they *have*. I just got off the phone to Detective Superintendent Flynn. Call him. He will verify they have solid evidence that proves my innocence.’

All the tension went from Maeve in a sigh. ‘I’m sorry for these questions, Love, especially after everything you’ve been through, but it’s been just so awful we can barely get our minds around it.’

‘I know.’

Margaret put in: ‘So if this was a warning from a criminal, who’s to say he doesn’t come back? I mean he might do for one of us, or one of the kids even. Oh God.’ She looked at Ambrose.

‘He won’t,’ Armand said.

‘Um, I don’t know,’ said Ambrose.

‘I know you and your pig headedness,’ Margaret said. ‘You’re not going to let it go. You’ll continue to provoke this . . . whoever he is, and then God knows who’ll be next. I have to think of my children.’ She looked at Ambrose, ‘We do – we have to think of the children.’

‘I’m going to retire, Margaret, on health grounds.’

His announcement surprised every person in the room, not least himself. There had been no forethought to the decision. It was a coward's reflex – since the operation he had been suffering mysterious anxieties and fearful dreams and he had felt slip some of his stamina for violence and hatred and cruelty. The truth was that Armand no longer had the stomach for police work.

He turned to Maeve, 'It will be alright with the pension and all that. We'll move away, get a bit of land and some hens.'

She squeezed his hand. 'I believe you, Armand. I've no doubt you'll take care of us. You always have. You are an honourable and conscientious man and that has always been quite enough for me. There are many husbands who pay scant regard to the needs of their families. My father, for one.'

Armand wondered who exactly Maeve was hoping to reassure.

The moment Flynn walked through the door and saw Barry 'Baz' Murphy's two arms in the air as if in a "the bastard who beat me was this wide" description, he realised that Baz was not the perpetrator, and that he had likely come up against the same person or persons who had killed the girl. He pulled a chair over to Baz's bed. 'I'm sorry for your loss,' he said.

Barry Murphy kept his eyes on the inaudible talent show that was on the TV in the corner of the ward.

'Looks like you've been through a rough time of it, Barry Boy'.

'Who the fuck are you?'

'Detective Superintendent Donal Flynn.' Flynn held his card before Barry Murphy's eyes. 'So who did this to you?'

'I fell off o' me bicycle.'

'Sure you did. Who attacked you, Barry?'

'A speed bump.'

'Listen to me, I've come here to help you. I'm going to find whoever it was killed Sondra.'

'Two floors down. I'm sure you know him.'

'It wasn't him, Barry. We have incontrovertible evidence that proves he didn't kill Sondra.'

'Of course yiz do.'

‘We actually did our best to charge him. We were at the point of, but then we got him on a camera, and he was nowhere near the house, not for the entire day. There’s no way he did it.’

Barry Murphy moved his eyes to look at Flynn. ‘If it wasn’t him, who was it?’

‘Why don’t you tell me who did this to you?’

‘They wouldn’t have done that to Son. Not put her in a copper’s bed. Why would they.’

‘Who wouldn’t have?’

Barry Murphy stared at the ceiling. He wiggled his chin.

‘Anything you tell me is between you, me and the wall. I’m only interested in getting the animal who did that to Sondra.’

‘Scratch my chin, will ya?’

‘What?’

‘My chin. It’s itchy.’

Flynn leaned across and he scratched Barry Murphy’s chin.

‘There were these guys – like the muscle heads of an organised racket. They’d warned me off, told me to get me bird off the street. I didn’t. Couldn’t. So them fuckers, they came back and they pushed me in a doorway and worked me over with bars, like iron bars, man. And next thing I know I’m in here and me cus comes in and he’s all like the picture of misery, and he says to me: Baz man, this john did Sondra, like killed her, and he’s a fucken pig, man, and he’s two floors down in the intensive ward.

I begged me cus to go down there and like pull his plug or somethin’, but he wouldn’t do it. He said I should go deal with my own shit. I’d know the copper by the dot on his nose.’

‘Can you tell me anything about the men who attacked you?’

‘Couldn’t say, like. Only that they were men, and they were like really fucken violent.’

As Armand became stronger he began to feel optimistic about his future. He took up jogging and he returned to lifting weights. He decided that things weren’t so bad, that they could sell their house and buy a smaller one, and he would embark on a new career; he hadn’t decided what, but maybe something in the arts.

‘I might teach acting.’

‘You could. You could give a class at the community centre.’

‘No, Maeve. Jesus. I mean in a proper acting school.’ They lay in bed. ‘I was a great actor.’

‘Yes, Love.’

‘Teaching, though . . .’ Armand switched off the bedside lamp. ‘I’m sure I’d be a brilliant coach – improv, method – I’m the master of them all.’

Armand lay awake for a time. He pondered the events since his collapse in the interrogation room – the surgery, his recovery - and he experienced the creep of an unpleasant realisation. It began with an image of a soldier - pale and dismayed, the soldier sat at the table of an imaginary cafe, and people – passers-by and waiters - saw a hero who had willingly squared up to death, and they loved him for his beautiful pathos.

Even as he indulged the scene, Armand was aware it was contrast to the degradation of his character. Enter Armand A. Burke: Rather than having made a hopeless dash at an enemy position, Armand had eaten too many burgers and burritos and had suffered the indignity of a heart transplant and the finger wagging of doctors as they admonished him about his diet and sedentary lifestyle. And there would be no happy ending, merely an acknowledgement of just how utterly mundane and bourgeois the entire experience had been - in fact how his life had been.

He was a minor player in a story without passion, romance, plot or conflict – there was nothing to Armand Burke’s drama. Even the lighting was bad – *These dull grey Irish skies!*

His closing thought was of the doctor telling him he had been dead for a full minute. The thought became a regret, and then a dream. He stood before a panel of the dead. There was Sondra - her red collared neck. Conor - his closed up face. Mama. And there was the shadow of the man who had bequeathed his heart.

The following morning Armand awoke with the pain of a harsh saying in his mind: *Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.* And he turned his back to the room and he decided that he didn’t want to

be a teacher, he didn't want to be anything, and that he never had and he never would amount to anything. He had taken a man's heart – wasted it - and this man now stood now with Armand's mother and Conor as a pantheon of the disappointed.

Armand refused to get out of bed for two days. Maeve and Margaret cajoled, pleaded, and finally they pulled on his legs and forced him to sit. They wrestled him into his clothes and down the stairs to the car. Maeve sat in the back with Armand while Margaret drove. They talked as if he wasn't there.

'I told him,' said Maeve.

'You did, Mammy. Often enough.'

'I said: you'll never do this on your own. You have to see that psychologist.'

'Isn't it's typical of Daddy though? Stubborn as a mule.'

The Doctor's room was a little too small to contain both their personal spaces, and Armand stood by the door. She looked up from a type of ledger.

'Armand Burke?'

'Yes.'

'I'm Doctor Cooper. Please take a seat.'

He sat in the chair that faced her. 'I was thinking that your family has come a long way. From barrels to bedlam.'

She ignored the joke. 'I have all your particulars – I think. Could you tell me how you are feeling?'

Armand studied the room. 'I'm OK. Tired.'

'That's to be expected. Are you sleeping?'

'Yes.'

'Eating? Do you have an appetite?'

'Yes, yes. Look I know that this is the small talk prior to the assassination of my mother, so let's get on with it.'

The doctor pushed her glasses down her nose and she looked at him. She wrote and underlined a word in her notebook. Armand could make out the peaks of the letter M. She looked again at Armand, 'So tell me about your mother.'

'She's no longer with us. She died a few years ago.'

The doctor nodded.

‘She brought me up to be a dutiful son and to always do the correct thing.’ Armand didn’t say it, but just as the French Foreign Legion use a motto - *Honneur et Fidélité* – to keep a load of psychopaths in check, his mother had impressed those same virtues on to his cold psyche. ‘She was French, an actress, and she was quite an amazing woman.’

‘Were you close?’

‘Very. She had a wonderful talent. She brought Kings and Presidents to their feet. *Par excellence*. That is what De Gaulle said of her.’

‘It sounds like she was a great woman.’

‘She was. I’ll not have her blamed. . .’ Armand looked out the window.

‘For what?’

‘If you decide I’m a sociopath or something, I’ll not allow you to pin it on her.’

‘I’m sure that you’re not a sociopath. What we’ll be trying to discern is how you feel – how you’ve been coping.’

‘I *am* a sociopath. There.’

‘Really?’

‘I have always had a mental stability the majority of people don’t have. I have never experienced the inferiority or doubt most people do. I have never cried, not even as a child. And I have never before had a problem sleeping.’

‘Having these traits doesn’t necessarily make you a sociopath.’

‘There’s no need to reassure me, doctor. To my mind, these are the qualities of a hero. And I have always believed I am exactly that: a hero.’ Armand crossed his legs. He studied his nails. ‘That is, until one day I was at the dentist, and while flicking the pages of a magazine my attention settled on an article with the title: *The Devil You Know*.

It was about psychopaths, and it basically said they are manipulative, deceitful, narcissistic and remorseless, and while sociopaths can be found in every walk of life, they are more than likely to work in positions of authority; say, in the police.

I ripped the page from the magazine and folded it into my pocket. When I returned home, I noticed a link to an online test.

As I ticked the boxes, it occurred to me that the very act of tearing the article from the magazine and denying it to other readers might be a forewarning of the result. I completed the test and clicked the submit button. The results placed me at the uppermost level of the psychopathic spectrum.'

'Well if that is true – if you are high on the sociopathic spectrum—'

'My father died when I was a baby so you can dismiss him from your enquiries.'

'If you are in fact high on the spectrum, it is not a thing we would blame on one's parents.'

'There. I knew you would do it.'

'Do what?'

'Drag my dead parents into this room.'

The doctor looked confused. She wrote something in her book. She asked: 'Did you catch the acting bug yourself?'

Armand sniffed, 'I have the gift. However, life, like a dirty old bus, has rolled over my talents. They are unexpressed.'

'And you regret that?'

'Yes.'

'And have you been more troubled by this lately? More-so than you would normally be?'

'I am not sure if this is in your notes, Doctor, but a murdered girl was insinuated into my bed. Furthermore, I've had a heart failure. I died and my own heart was ripped from my torso and replaced by another's. My thwarted potential as an actor has not been my primary concern these last few weeks.'

'I understand . . .' The doctor paused. 'So can you name for me your predominant emotions at this time?'

'Well I can't exactly say that I am thrilled.'

'So what do you feel?'

'I don't know. You tell me. How should a man who has had his heart torn from his body feel?'

‘In such circumstances there may be many emotions. You might have irrational feelings of shame – you may feel that you brought your body to a state whereby it failed you. And it often happens that men re-evaluate their strength and physical capabilities and this can often stir up a sense of self-doubt.’

‘I’ve always been a man who could handle himself. I did a bit of boxing in my youth, and I’ve gone toe to toe with some real scumbags in my line of work. With this . . . with everything that has happened . . .’ Armand broke eye contact with the doctor. He found his knuckles – a scar lay along them like a strand of gossamer. ‘I got this from a big bruiser who beat his wife so often she kept an overnight bag for the hospital. One punch and I knocked the entire front row of his teeth out. I said if you ever lay a finger on her again, I’ll kill you, and as far as I know, he hasn’t. That’s the kind of man . . .’ He lifted his hand from his lap: it trembled. ‘I can’t go back to my job, doctor.’

‘People who have undergone transplant operations often suffer from anxieties and fear. And the fact is that it’s hard to be a man - men go through life forcing themselves to be strong and unemotional, and what you went through will often shake that edifice apart.’

‘Wonderful.’ Armand said it flatly.

‘You can choose to see this as a negative, but there is a lot to be said for embracing your fears and finally allowing yourself to be you.’

‘But this is not me. It never has been.’

‘You are going to have to change, Armand. It cannot be business as usual after what you’ve been through. You need to embrace your fears.’

Armand affected a yawn. He looked at his watch. He hoped to convey boredom, but his knee jumped and his face was flushed.

‘Armand?’

‘No. You are wrong. This is not some repressed part of me coming to the surface. It is not me. I am not this man.’

The doctor closed her eyes. She smoothed the air with her hand. ‘OK,’ she said. ‘I’ve been somewhat clumsy. The point I wish to

convey is that what you have been through can in fact be a transformative experience. In these situations we are compelled to minimise stress, improve our diet, and become more active. Many people are inspired to do the things they always dreamed of. Who knows but you might choose to express a little of that acting talent.'

To Armand's horror a tear escaped his eye and rappelled down his cheek.

'It's quite alright,' the doctor said.

Armand touched his fingers to his cheek and he gawped at the moisture. 'Oh Dear God, I don't know what's the matter with me. I've only ever cried from pain.'

The doctor reached over and she touched his knee, 'This *is* pain.' She took his hand and held it.

'I suppose I have been through a lot.'

'That's alright, Armand. You're in a safe place here. Just take your time with it.'

Armand closed his eyes and he plumbed the murk of his mind. He found anger.

'I hate a man.' He stammered the words.

'Why?'

'I hate the fact he assumes an authority separate to his rank.'

'He's a policeman?'

'Yes. He's my boss.' Armand closed his eyes. A chant surged from some acid part of him: 'I hate his type, their smug suburban conformity, their diamond patterned V-necks, their creased slacks and rubber soled shoes, not one of them any different to a million other suburban ciphers.'

Armand opened his eyes. He banged on: 'their legacies as enduring as dew in the morning sun – an assiduously squeezed golf handicap, their sound-byte wisdom at the club house bar.' He shrilled: '*The problem with this Government is that they're only in it for the back handers . . . they should have played a running flanker.* Each bullshit pronouncement a suggestion of expertise, yet nothing more than the salient points of some red top editorial they perused within the pine fresh clime of their fleet cars. I hate them. Hate them! Hate them!'

‘Armand, I want you to breathe.’

‘I hate them.’

‘Come on now, breathe.’

Armand began to cry. ‘I used to look at these people and see them as dismissive of a vast world of possibilities and perspectives. As a younger man I would say: Look at these drones, they choose to make a neat little garden of their lives and are only fierce in defence of its borders. But . . .’ Armand broke off and he stared at the window.

‘But . . .’ prompted the doctor.

‘But lately I have been thinking: what am I?’

His anger ebbed as he thought of his own insipid marriage, his resentful adopted daughter, and his semi-d with its luridly green lawn.

‘One day has folded into another, and another, and another, till my life is so tightly layered with obligation and comforts that I can never hope to wriggle free from the weight of it. How can I ever hope to be an actor now, or live in a cultural quarter, or be a Maigret or a Poirrot? I’m nothing. And that’s all I ever will be . . . nothing.’

The next morning Armand sat by a window that faced on to the back garden. Over the last year he had developed a tolerance for sitting still and waiting. There was now nothing to watch for, so Armand surveilled two small birds going to and from their nest, till a magpie dispatched their fledglings in less than thirty seconds. And he mused that at the end of everything, there is a crime.

He held his resignation letter in his hand. He had addressed it to Flynn. He unfolded it and he read it again.

For the attention of Detective Superintendent Flynn.

I am hereby tendering my resignation, effective immediately.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my dissatisfaction at the treatment I have received from you and your department. Not alone did you never allow me the opportunity to express my talents

and abilities, but you seem to have taken a perverse pleasure in assigning me to a role that was far beneath my abilities.

Then, when I was framed for that murder, you used the situation as an opportunity to attack me further. You persecuted me to such an extent that you caused me to have a heart failure.

If you had been a good manager, rather than torment me, you would have listened to me.

In receiving this letter, you are losing the best detective you could have ever had.

Yours Sincerely, Armand Burke.

Armand folded the letter. He watched the magpie pull the nest apart – *the villagers dead, the storm-trooper torches the village.*

When they lost Conor, Maeve returned to her family in Donegal. She planned to stay for a week, two at most, but then her aunt became terminally ill and Maeve stayed on for the best part of a year.

Her aunt left behind a eleven year old daughter, and Maeve insisted they adopt her.

‘After all the darkness we have been through, Margaret will be our ray of sunshine.’

‘But Maeve, we really have no obligation to this child.’

It was the angriest he had ever seen Maeve; she raised her voice to a shout: ‘Sometimes you appal me, Armand. Do you know that?! You do have an obligation to this girl. She’s my cousin, for Christ’s sake! We’re adopting her and that’s all there is to it!’

Maeve seemed to think that Margaret had turned out well, but Armand wasn’t so sure. Granted, she had become a barrister, but clearly her motivation had been to diminish her adoptive father, a mere policeman. And to add insult she had become a somewhat successful actor. Then there was the fact she had chosen to marry Ambrose.

Armand's first visit to Ambrose's house was on the day before Ambrose and Margaret were to be married. Armand had been immediately irritated by Ambrose's zen garden and polytunnels of organic herbs. As they sipped fermented tea, Ambrose explained his refusal to wear cotton – the fact that tens of thousands of children are taken out of school and forced to work in cotton plantations.

When Armand suddenly remembered he had to be elsewhere, Ambrose clasped his hand and said: 'God be with you.'

To which Armand had sniffed: 'Let's just say goodbye.'

Grinning, Ambrose had closed his trap: 'But the expression, goodbye, comes from the old English word, godbwy, which, um, is a contraction of God be with ye.'

Armand had fumed in the car on the way home. 'I don't care what you say, Maeve, he's an absolute twat. And to call his children Druid and Fern. Sure that's worse than forcing kids to pick cotton. And why the hell should Margaret take on his children? Why?'

Maeve's response had stumped him: 'Why do you care, Love?' He didn't. He never had. He was just angry.

Glancing around Margaret's living room, he noted that by now he'd been replaced by God. Too many of her pictures contained the word 'Father': God the Father, protect this house; Holy Father, light the way.

As he inserted his resignation letter into the envelope, he was sure he felt the feelers of a new regard for Margaret: a puzzling tenderness.

* * * * *

In his year of seditary surveillance, Armand's belly had come to approximate a shelf - a surface on which he could quite easily balance a burger box or even a twenty ounce cola.

Since the operation he lost all desire for burgers or burritos, and he was perplexed to often find himself fantasising about Coq au Vin and Bouillabaisse. He developed a fascination for cooking programmes, and he liked to watch the chefs chop, pinch and grind, and pull simmering Creuset dishes from their ovens.

To Maeve's delight Armand brought her to the best restaurants where he would pore over the menus, recovering his mother's words: champignons for mushrooms, petit pois for peas, jambon for ham.

'It's as though my French sensibilities were revived on the operating table,' he said to Maeve as they ate lunch at a seafood restaurant. 'I had to hide that side of me in school - all the expressions and mannerisms I had picked up from Mama. The moronic brutes figured them to be gay.' He speared a cube of Sea Bass. 'But there's no way I'm going to betray another aspect of my make up. I'm going to do something with this.'

'That's fine,' said Maeve. 'Sure I just want you to be happy.' In truth she was somewhat alarmed by the firmness of his tone. He reminded her of King Leonidas facing down the Persians - or at least of the actor who had played him - and Maeve feared that her husband was about to do something equally reckless.

'We're going to invest in a restaurant,' he announced.

'Ah no.'

'Hear me out, will you? It's Nestor Magill's - a good restaurant, a thriving one. But the place is old, and they're in need of an upgrade - fire safety, better ventilation in the kitchen, that sort of thing. You see they've been flouting regulations - they have been for years - and if they don't get their house in order - they have till the end of May - they'll have to pull the shutters down.'

'I'm not so sure, Love.'

'This is an opportunity,' he continued. 'I can be a majority shareholder. I'm only thirty six, Maeve. I need this.'

'But we've been through so much upheaval . . .'

'I know.' 'But what else can I do? Act?' Armand studied his reflection in the bowl of a spoon. 'I worry that lately my Hollywood looks have somewhat ebbed.'

'Were you not going to be a teacher?'

He blew out some air.

'But you'd need years of experience to be running a restaurant.'

'I have the passion for this, Maeve, the determination. Ever since the operation, I've been incredibly excited about food.'

‘But this might be just a phase.’

‘It’s not.’

‘What about something in security? You could be an independent consultant. There’s always—’

‘Jesus, Maeve.’

They sat for a while in silence; the only sound was of their cutlery clinking on the plates.

Armand crossed his knife and fork and he said: ‘I didn’t necessarily deserve another chance at life, but I got one. I need to do something big.’

Maeve sighed. ‘If Doctor Cooper believes you are able for this, then yes, you’ll have my blessing.’

The following day, Armand visited the doctor.

‘So how have you been, Armand?’

‘The honest answer?’

‘Of course.’

‘Weird – that’s how.’ He held his hands as if to describe a measure of weirdness. ‘There have been the strangest changes that I can only ascribe to the transplant. The fact is *I feel*. For example, the girl who was murdered in my home, while before I could express only anger, I now feel a sadness for her suffering.’

The doctor put in: ‘There are seven stages—’

‘No, it’s not that. It’s everything. It’s Maeve and Margaret. I often have a tenderness towards them I have never known before. When I gauge this new heart I mostly feel my old coldness, but at times I feel a sudden baffling upsurge of love. I am like an intermittent saint.

And then there’s food. I used to eat junk, rubbish; packed full of fat, sugar and salt and wrapped in paper, that’s how I liked it. I’d rather jump in a lake than eat that stuff now. I have become strangely obsessed with ingredients and recipes and my palette craves for subtle and interesting flavours. I want to be around food.’

‘Hence the restaurant?’

‘Yes.’

‘As I understand it, the restaurant trade can be tough. The failure rate is high. And it concerns me you have no experience . . .’

‘But I *do* have experience. When I left school, I worked for a year in my uncle’s bistro. I ran the place – front of house, kitchen, accounts, hiring and firing. I was completely immersed in it.’

‘OK. Be that as it may. But I can’t help be worried about the emotional and psychological impact of—’ The doctor shifted in her chair. ‘Do you feel that right now you have what it takes – and I’m not just talking about money and an ability to work hard – to make this a successful venture?’

‘Definitely. I would make it *amazing*. I would show people that I am more than a mere voyeur of criminals.’

‘What people?’

‘Everybody. My mother always saw my potential, and she was very unforgiving when I sold myself short. When I told her I intended to join the Guards, she blew a fuse. She did this angry parody of a policeman and clumped up and down our kitchen, shouting: You sacrifice greatness for a book of the speeding tickets! It was the first time I ever went against her. And you know something? – She was absolutely right. She was always right. I should never have listened to Maeve. I should have listened to Mama.’

The doctor stroked her chin.

‘There’s actually a picture of her hanging in Nestor Magill’s. They have a wall of all the prominent theatre people from the fifties and sixties. Mama only ever dined there the one time. Rather than hang her picture between Samuel Beckett and Rock Hudson, Magill hung it further down the throng, between two pantomime actors, and boy was Mama pissed off about that. I don’t blame her though. She was by far the best actor of her time.’

‘Does her photo still hang there?’

‘If it does, it horrifies me to think it will likely end up in a builders’ skip.’

The doctor looked up from her notes. ‘I’m a little concerned you might not be doing this for yourself, Armand.’

‘Doctor, please.’

‘It’s just that—’

Armand chopped the air with his hand. 'No!' He closed his eyes. 'I'm sorry.'

'That's quite alright.'

'I know I was probably a bit heated in our last meeting. I'm determined to keep a lid on that.'

'Armand. I want you to freely express yourself. There is no judgement here.'

'My point was – is - that I don't want to pass through this world unnoticed. I have a terror of insignificance.'

'Of being like almost everyone else?'

Armand opened his eyes. 'Yes.'

'Why?'

'I don't know why. I sometimes feel that I never quite lost the sense of exceptionalism I felt as a child. Others do. I didn't.'

'So do you feel you are superior to other people?'

'You are wondering if I am a narcissist. Maybe I am. I don't know. I just know that I can never understand why the majority of people aspire only to comfort. They are content to pass through life unnoticed and disappear into nothingness and be quickly forgotten, just so long as they are . . .'

'Comfortable.'

'Yes. I can barely stand to say the word.'

'So you worry you are like these people - unnoticed, and that you too will be forgotten?'

'Exactly. Do you know that feeling when you are aware you had a task but you have forgotten what it was?'

'I think so. Like a niggle?'

'Yes. Well I have that feeling, but not for something forgotten - I have it for something I have yet to realise. I tried to answer it with acting. Then I threw myself into police work for nearly fifteen years, threw myself down a wrong road, and even though I was thwarted all the way, I stuck with it. I got *comfortable* and I allowed a betrayal of my potential. In our last meeting, you told me that many people who've been through a transplant are often inspired to do something meaningful.'

'Yes.'

‘Well . . .’ Armand tilted his head and smirked.

‘So you quit the police . . . this restaurant.’

‘Statistically, I have only ten to fifteen years to live - to make a difference, and I intend to show the world what I am capable of. I will create the best restaurant in Europe. You’ll see.’

That night Armand came awake with a gasp. The silhouette of a devil dimmed to the dark parts of his mind, and two sounds nudged at his lips: an *ah* and an *oh*. He quietly mouthed them into the darkness: ah, oh; ah, oh; ma, lo; ma, lone. He gave utterance to a name: Malone.

Three

Nestor Magill's was named for the founder who had learned his culinary skills as a chef in the Elysees Palace. His son now owned the place – he was the affable front of house man, but he was more interested in drink than food. The restaurant had been trading on the fumes of its reputation for some years, and Armand knew that Maeve would never have allowed him to invest their savings if she had known the business was in trouble.

That said, Armand did not feel that he was deceiving Maeve – he believed that he could make this restaurant work. The idea began with a heading in the business section of the Times: *Creditors File for Administration of Old Dublin Restaurant*. The article read:

Nestor Magill's, the dining room of Dublin's glitterati in the 1950s, has filed for administration as it fails to meet bank repayments and secure credit terms from suppliers. Nestor Magill's, which boasts a dining room inspired by the hall of mirrors in The Palace of Versailles, has long been noted for its fine French cuisine and wines; however in recent years it has seen a marked decline in its popularity, and has received several less than glowing reviews from some of Ireland's leading food critics. The restaurant is owned and run by Charles Magill, the son of the late Nestor Magill.

It was then when the idea began to form in Armand's mind. At first he dismissed it as ridiculous: he was no longer such a free spirit that he could just reinvent himself. But he gradually began to dismantle the notion of impossibility. There were things he could bring to Nestor Magill's – money, of course; however, there were other things: his occupational skills in reading people would give him the edge in a renegotiation with the creditors; there was his passion for good food; there was of course his intelligence and professionalism; there was his ability to charm; and there were his skills in

surveillance which would be useful in helping him to restore – surpass even – the former reputation of Nestor Magill's.

He booked a table for one. In a room of thirty tables on a Saturday evening in the heart of the city, there were only two other bookings. The food was awful, as was the service, and the solitary waiter handed him a greasy water glass with his thumb pressed to the inside of the glass. There were, however, aspects of the establishment Armand appreciated – there were the photos (Armand was delighted to see his mother there), and there were the large mirrors with their jaded silvering, the outsized chandeliers, and the ebonised statues that stood as quotation marks to every booth. Armand beckoned Charles Magill to his table.

Charles Magill was round and red as a medieval barkeep – it occurred to Armand that he might have been parboiled. He had a fresh flower in his lapel, and Armand noted that the laces were missing from one of his shoes.

‘Mr Magill?’

‘None other. May I be of service to you, sir?’

‘I am wondering if you would be so kind as to join me for a digestif?’

Charles Magill hesitated. He assessed Armand, sensed the fluent authority, his purposefulness – and Armand imagined - the same assassin's smile he had seen on the debt collectors. Charles Magill asked in a tight voice: ‘What is it you want?’

‘A chat. Nothing more. Believe me, I am not here to spoil your evening. In fact I hope to significantly improve it.’

Charles Magill gestured to the waiter. Armand ordered a Cognac and Charles Magill said that he would have the same.

‘My name is Armand – Armand Bertonneau.’ If he was to embark on this enterprise, Armand was going to jettison his old surname and with it the taint of Sondra Murphy's murder. ‘May I call you Charles?’

‘Please.’

‘This is a beautiful room.’

Charles didn't look at the room. He looked at Armand. Armand noted the yellow discoloration of his eyes – the exerted liver. The

Cognacs arrived and Charles took his in one swig. He adjusted his posture to that of a man with pressing commitments.

‘I would like to become a partner in your restaurant,’ Armand said. ‘I have a passion for food, time on my hands and money. If you think me presumptuous in making this proposal, I apologise, and I will say good night.’

Charles lurched like a Labrador on a choke lead. Retrieving his composure, he signalled to the waiter.

Armand pressed on: ‘If we can do a deal – if you will have me as a partner - I believe that together we can turn this place around.’

‘A deal?’

‘Yes.’

‘I think that you have confused me with a man who sells cattle.’

‘It’s no secret that you are experiencing some cash flow difficulties.’

The waiter placed another cognac before Charles.

‘Shall I go on?’ Armand asked.

‘As you wish.’

‘This will all be subject to me seeing the books and due diligence, but here’s what I’m proposing. I will undertake a negotiation with your creditors and the banks and if we can restructure your debts, I will commit the requisite amount of cash to clear them down to a manageable level. I will finance an upgrade. In consultation with you, I will oversee the recruitment of new kitchen and service staff. We re-launch, maintaining the Magill name, and my role in the business thereafter will be to manage the books and standards across the whole enterprise.’

‘And me? My role?’

‘You will continue to *be* Nestor Magill’s. You will be the front of house man. I propose a split of fifty one per cent of shares to me, assuming you are the only shareholder.’

‘So you propose that I be the minority shareholder?’

‘I’m sorry, Charles, but that aspect is not up for negotiation. I’m offering to risk my money, so I’ll need control.’

Charles raised his glass. His face appeared brown and bulbous through the liquid, like a wood carved cherub’s. ‘You appear to be a

civilised man, Armand, so let us drink a toast to the prospect of a long and fruitful partnership.’

Flynn stared at two items on his desk, one was a resignation letter from Armand Burke, and the other was the centrefold of a Sunday tabloid; it was headlined: *COP SUSPECTED OF PROSTITUTE MURDER*. There was a large photo of Garda headquarters, and another of a Garda badge. Flynn noted the error of the title: Armand was no longer suspected of the actual murder. He glanced again at the resignation letter - nor was he a cop for that matter. The article went on to say:

Even though the mother of two was brutally murdered in the actual bed of this Dublin based detective, he has never been arrested for the crime and continues to walk the streets as a free man. Sources say that this same detective recently turned a blind eye to a huge consignment of smuggled cigarettes. It is this paper's understanding that this suspected killer of a young mother of two small daughters will soon be returning to his duties as a Detective in the National Surveillance Unit.

Flynn expected a call from Headquarters. They would call him in, ask him for a progress report, and stare at him all braid and open mouths when he tells them he has nothing. The Chief Superintendent would say: *And what the hell am I supposed to tell the Assistant Commissioner?* And someone might remark: *You fought this guy's corner when he lost the cigarettes, yes?* And there would be insinuation in the question – the accusation that Flynn was covering for Armand. And they would all of them stare, grave as hanging judges, and Flynn would feel his career slipping into the same black hole that had taken his wife and his home.

Flynn looked again at Armand's letter. Armand had quit. Flynn would do him a favour and log it as early retirement due to ill health.

His computer dinged: an email from the Chief's office. He was to attend a meeting at ten a.m. the following morning. The subject: an update on the Sondra Murphy murder investigation.

In the coming weeks the agreement with Charles was formalised, and Armand presented a proposal to the creditors that they were initially hesitant to accept, but he gradually won them over with a mix of charm and aggression. There was then a huge amount of work to be done in arranging an upgrade, and in the recruitment of new staff.

Armand assessed the restaurant in terms of potential turnover. There were ten banquettes that could each seat up to four covers, ten tables that could seat between four and eight, and twenty smaller tables that could each seat two. He studied the bookings going back ten years. At capacity, the restaurant had served one hundred and thirty diners. Armand multiplied that by a typical spend. He realised that even if he could achieve half capacity from Sunday to Thursday and full capacity on Fridays and Saturdays, it wouldn't be quite enough.

'It's simply quaint, Charles, to have one sitting at weekends. Two will bump up our margins.'

'And if the first isn't done by eight forty five, I'm to throw them out?' Charles demanded.

'Better to politely remind them that when they made the booking, they were informed they would have the table for one hour and forty five minutes.'

'And then kick them out?'

'You invite them to continue their evening at the bar.'

'This is monstrous.'

'Look Charles, this potentially gives us an extra two hundred and sixty covers a week. We need to be doing that.'

Armand lingered at the restaurant each evening – having wished Charles and the decorators a good night, he would spend hours beneath a cone of light in the back office, soldering wires and capacitors to a circuit board.

He didn't return home for three days and nights – his infrequent bed was a tatty chaise longue that stood in the reception. Maeve

despaired that he was straining his heart but Armand assured her that he had never felt so calm.

He nominated one banquette to be his command centre. He installed a sliding panel beneath the table and he laid it out in numbered switches. He ran wires from the switches to lamps that were screwed to the tables. The wires terminated in transmitters he had placed in the columns of the lamps. He placed a ticking clock on table one, and having inserted his ear phone, he hit the switch and he listened. Loud and clear. He ran the same test for every table, and as he anticipated that his restaurant would be packed most evenings, he tuned a radio to the drone of two men discussing jazz. He ran speakers from the radio to every part of the room. He moved the clock around the room and he listened – in some instances adjusting the receivers - till he was satisfied that even a whispered conversation would carry above the hubbub of a busy restaurant.

Armand planned for Nestor Magill's to be closed for six weeks even though he could feasibly have it ready in three. He believed that the closure should be a separation between the failed Nestor Magill's and the new – any less than a month and people might think of it as the same dump with a lick of paint.

To further emphasise the separation, Armand met with journalists and columnists and only invited Charles to join them at the end of the meetings. While Armand would be careful to outline a rigorous commitment to food and service, Charles would breeze in tipsily and propound that Nestor Magill's would once again blaze brightest in the firmament of fine dining eateries. The journalists loved it. Armand and Charles were as contrasting as the computerised booking system and the chipped cherubim. Armand sat back at the end of each interview and he knew that he had given them more than a taster plate: he had choreographed their copy. He anticipated the headings – *Nestor Magill's, Moving Forward while Looking Back*.

Opening night was by invitation only, and Armand arrived early and he sat with a glass of Beaujolais in the empty dining room.

He looked across the room, at its layers and layers of detail – the sharp white linen; the cream china and the polished glasses; the

muted paints; the fresh cut orchids – and he thought of the interminable hours he had devoted to the shape of the butter dishes or the length of stem for the wine glasses.

His attention settled on a sunbeam that slanted from a high window. It fell on a cleaner's bucket. He would have liked if it had fallen on the photo of his mother. He had moved her to a place of more prominence, between Samuel Beckett and Rock Hudson, and he had asked the carpenter to elevate her by a few millimetres, as though she stood centre on a three level podium.

Armand raised his glass, 'You never had it easy, Mother, but you did a fine job of raising your son.'

His mother had been from Ostend in Belgium. She had never wanted to return, not even when Armand's father left her a widow with a two rear old boy. She had reasoned that in classical times actresses were considered to be mere prostitutes, and if that association lingers, she most definitely did not want to be an actress whose domicile is a port.

She had long considered a move to Paris – her parents had been French and there were cousins there - and Armand sometimes wondered how that might have worked out for him. He doubted he would have been a gendarme. It's likely the French would have been perceptive of his genius, and he might by now be a great actor of French cinema.

But never mind, he thought as he studied the room, *this restaurant is a fantastic achievement*. He looked again at the photo of his mother, at her eyes swept back like a doe's, and he hoped that she would agree.

The cleaners pushed in with their Hoovers and Armand abandoned his wine and went to the kitchen. The commis chefs were prepping ingredients, and Armand was met by a waft of cinnamon. Charles appeared from the cellar. He uncorked some reds, and the scent of Christmas filled the kitchen, and Armand whistled, and it occurred to him that he hadn't whistled in years.

'Ah shit.'

One of the assistants had tipped a bowl of freshly ground cinnamon over the work surface and he was attempting to mop it with a damp cloth.

‘Not like that,’ said Armand. ‘You’ll waste it.’ As Armand leaned in, the assistant’s breath curled into his nostrils. It was a mix of halitosis and spearmint, and it hit Armand like a power slam. He staggered from the kitchen to an adjoining store where he sat in dismay of his anguished gasps. He wondered what the hell was going on. And his heart – this stranger’s heart: it hammered like a harbinger of some disaster. Armand remembered his own heart in his hand like raw fillet mignon, and recalling the cold meat feeling of it, he vomited into an ice bucket.

The door opened a crack, ‘Are you alright?’ asked Charles.

‘Yes. Yes. I’m fine. I’ll be there in a minute.’

With deep breaths Armand expanded his chest and eased the confinement of his heart. The organ stilled. There lingered a dislocated feeling and he felt the need to affirm that he was Armand Burke. He checked his reflection in a silver tray. There he was – his face in all its heroic beauty, only entirely drained of colour.

As the guests arrived, Armand longed to revel in his achievement and lap up their praise, but he couldn’t overcome an awful queasiness that had lingered from the panic attack, and the greenish tinge of his complexion contrasted with the magnificent ensemble of his three piece Kennedy Blue suit, white double cuffed shirt and red woven silk tie. Every expression of congratulation was accompanied by words of concern: *Are you feeling alright, Mister Bertonneau? You look exhausted.*

Maeve was horrified. She begged him to come home, but he resisted until there remained only herself, Armand and Charles.

‘I have never before hugged a man,’ said Charles. He opened his arms for Armand. ‘But I have hugged many a man’s wife.’ He embraced Maeve.

‘It was a triumph,’ Armand said in a small voice.

‘But it won’t be such a triumph if you fall down dead,’ said Maeve.

That night Armand dreamt that he lay in a tangle of thorns. The pain was only one part to a million of fear as he scanned the dark. A figure greyed from the blackness, the rancid waft of its breath preceding it. It wore a hood and Armand could see only the eyes – pale and one of them distorted, as though teared with blood.

The creature loomed in and just short of Armand's face, it stopped, and the crude wedge of its nose, dimly illumined, flared and wrinkled, and Armand wondered what it was that this ghoul sought. Blood? Meat?

The following morning, Maeve was shocked by Armand's pale complexion and grunting listless demeanour. She insisted they go immediately to a doctor.

The doctor explained that Armand's arrest, interrogation and heart failure had been a huge shock to Armand's psyche, and that Armand had more than likely suffered a panic attack, a quite typical response to what he had endured. His mind may have equated some aspect of the restaurant kitchen – its confinement, possibly - with the interrogation room of the Garda building, and in a misguided attempt to protect Armand, it had triggered a fight or flight response. The doctor prescribed Armand an anti-anxiety drug.

'Another addition to the pick'n'mix of Immunosuppressants and steroids,' Armand remarked to Maeve as she drove them home. Nevertheless, he was glad of anything that would prevent another attack, and he took the first pill in the car.

The following morning, as Armand struggled over the day's inventories and rosters, he realised that the anti-anxiety pills had caused in him a vague and floating feeling that diminished his ability to concentrate, so he sharpened his mind with two espressos. He had a restaurant to manage.

Armand sat most evenings with his attention fixed on the sliding panel. He tuned in to the conversations at various tables, and he listened to real time and constant critiques of the establishment:

entirely - and often brutally – honest remarks about the ambience, the food and the service.

A patron complained to his wife that their waiter had been in the toilet at the same time as he had, and that the waiter had left the bathroom without washing his hands. Armand excised that waiter from future rosters.

More often the criticism would be of the food – the mussels too rubbery or the onion soup too salty. Armand would transcribe these remarks to a sheet of paper, and if two or more patrons had made the same remark, Armand would berate the chefs and they would often berate him back for the quality of his suppliers.

The married couples were the best for feedback. They had trammelled every topic of their lives – their histories, opinions, their jokes and their stories – and they now had only their circumstances: the food before them, the service and their surroundings. Although to Armand's mind, their feedback could occasionally be criticism by proxy – they might profess to be angry about the food or service, but in reality they were simply angry with each other.

They mostly lacked the enthusiasm of the first dates, the young men in breathless attendance to spray tanned girls. These couples had their histories, their opinions, their jokes and their stories, and they had little to say about the food or service.

There was the occasional snob. They implied a more evolved palette, and Armand thought their arousal overplayed, as though there exists a G-spot for Foie Gras.

At weekends there would be young bachelor groups striving to outdo each other in obscenity; and more often groups of girls – noisy gaggles who barely ate and appreciated wine for its quantity.

Armand welcomed criminals to the restaurant, often giving them the best tables and free drinks, and before long Nestor Magill's was attracting a steady trickle of criminal patrons. He sustained the hope that he might learn something of the criminal godfather and the murdered girl in his bed, some piece of information that would clear the lingering whiff of suspicion.

At times he would feel a nostalgic pleasure as he eavesdropped on their conversations. One evening, having listened in on two

businessmen discussing data segmentation, Armand clicked in on a conversation between two drug smugglers who were waiting to meet with a prospective partner.

‘So why the fuck is he called Two Eared John?’

‘He useta be One Eared John,’ the other answered. ‘Lost an ear in a disagreement with Jimmy Chew. Then he came into some money - cash in transit - and he paid for a new ear to be creased from a flap of his arse.’ The criminal cleared his throat and he added: ‘Now he’s got himself the two ears.’

Flynn sat at his desk and he stared at the laminated card he had pulled from his wallet. It had been a gift from his parish priest, given on the day Flynn had made detective. It read: *The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice*. Flynn had long given up believing that.

When he had joined the force, he had believed in the essential purity of each person and he had pictured each suspect as they might have been when they were three years old – before abuse or neglect had warped their minds to criminality.

Before long, that child dimmed. It could not withstand a succession of unrepentantly vicious criminals, and after a stint in the Sexual Assault Unit and one particularly artful and impenitent paedophile priest, Flynn accepted that many of his suspects were evil and held no hope or desire for redemption. They only hoped to weasel their way to bail or acquittal so they could continue to rape, ravage and rob.

He glanced again at the card. *There is no God*, he thought. *It is everyone for themselves*.

That very morning he had spied the injustice of his wife and Flaherty, their hands mingling across a table and she touching his fat face.

The day he had returned home to find his suitcase packed and placed in the hall, he had asked her to return the engagement ring – it had come down from his grandmother. She said she would. He had seen it flash on her right hand as she caressed Flaherty’s cheek. *Diamonds are forever, even if I’m not*.

Flynn asked the card: 'So where's the justice in that smarmy bastard stealing my wife?'

He remembered her explanation: *All you do is sit in your chair and watch your birds and lions and stuff. You don't give a damn about my needs.* He had asked why her needs were so important. What about his? What about their two boys away in the boarding school and their home pulled from under them?

For all his demands on her conscience, Flynn hadn't been seeking excuses. He had already decided that every being is in a headlong, dispassionate will to meet their own needs, and that our only imperative is personal advantage and all that is good and decent is simply stratagem. And when people close on this realisation as a bull closes on a matador, the priests had always darted in as picadors to distract and avert; hence the card.

Flynn threw it into the drawer. There were a stack of twelve manila folders on his desk. Another twelve cases he wouldn't be sending to the Director of Public Prosecution. Insufficient evidence. And all of them as guilty as hell. Another twelve reverses on that moral arc.

He sighed. Even though he had come to believe that the fight against crime is ultimately pointless, and this way of thinking was not at all convenient to his career, he had to get on with the job. He mightn't meet her needs, but he sure as hell had to meet her payments.

He had been given two months to resolve the Armand Burke case. It was a jumble of fragments that would not cohere: a murder; a warning; Burke's criminal mastermind. Flynn fanned his notes and he stared at them. Exactly why would they kill a girl and place her in Burke's bed? To stop him from asking his idle questions? No, to Flynn's mind the action far outweighed the provocation – the provocation as Burke had presented it. Flynn unlocked a drawer and retrieved his notebook. He wondered if Armand might be holding something back, if Armand might be mixed up with the killer and the girl was a warning to Armand to keep his mouth shut. There was also this restaurant of his. Dirty money? A criminal front? Flynn

doubted that Armand was rotten, but he had to look at every possibility.

He had reached the point of hauling Armand's wife in – *a dirty business* – when something in the news had caught his attention.

He leafed through the notebook to the page where Armand had spoken of a tout by the name of Harry Nugent. After Armand had roughed up the kid in the second car, Francis Dillon, he had called around to Mister Nugent, a petty criminal who could miracle whiskey into bullshit. Armand had traded a bottle of Tullamore Dew for some corroboration. Flynn read the transcript of their conversation.

Witness: Harry was completely freaked out when I asked him about this one gangland figure. He didn't know whether to bless or piss himself. He said I should forget about this guy. What guy? I asked. No-one, forget it, he said. So I pushed him, and he said: OK, let's say there might be a guy. Let's say for instance there might be a guy who runs the logistics for every crime family and gang out there - a bit like a cash and carry to the retail trade.

And then Harry forgot to keep it conjectural and he drifted into the actual.

He said this guy doesn't step on his clients' toes. He knows that if he starts moving drugs he'll have the head bangers with their machine pistols on his turf. So he's smart enough to keep his beak out, and instead he makes himself indispensable to the gangs. He provides warehousing, transport, hardware and laundering – training even. He's smart, because this way he's not confined to territories. He can operate across the entire island without stepping on any toes. Though Harry added he runs girls on his home patch – knocking shops and some really creepy stuff, like he farms young girls out, boys even, to deviants. And he's big into extortion. What else? His outfit offers intimidation – they'll threaten your competitors, rough them up, that sort of thing. They do reputational damage, honey traps, compromising pornography – They can remotely download child pornography to your IP address. They'll also do murder for hire – clean murders that look like accidents. That's a speciality in

fact. Harry told me this guy loves to kill, that he can be quite imaginative.

Flynn jotted at the end of this transcript: Harry Nugent, deceased. He had heard it on the car radio that morning: *the male victim of Thursday night's fire in Nugents Automotive has been named by Gardai as Harold Nugent.*

As Armand acted on the unwitting feedback of his diners, Nestor Magill's began to receive at first positive, and then glowing reviews.

'Can you believe it,' said Charles as he entered the dining room one morning. 'The Times described us as Dublin's leading restaurant.' He placed the review on Armand's table.

Armand scanned through the article. Phrases jumped out: *transcends and transports . . . whip smart service . . . an exquisite combination of crunch and flavour . . .*

'This brings its own problems, Charles. We live in a town that abhors pedestals. These critics will begin to hope for a bad meal more-so than a good one. We slip once and they'll be on us like a pack of ravenous hyenas.'

Charles appeared to pale.

'I'm sorry, Charles. I haven't been sleeping. I've been having horrible dreams.'

A waiter waved from the lobby, 'There's someone to see you,' he called.

'That'll be the builder.' Armand stood. He pointed to the newspaper. 'We are at the point where we are getting too many good reviews. We can barely cope with a full room, seven days a week. That's why the builder is here. We need to look at expanding the kitchen.'

As Armand, Charles and the builder mapped out the dimensions for a larger walk in freezer, a face appeared in a window of one of the kitchen doors. Armand stared at a portrait of wolfish curiosity - Flynn! - and he felt like a little piggy in a house of straw.

Flynn ordered drinks from the bar and he took them to a table in the dining room. He tilted his chair and he studied the arches of the ceiling. He thought of an expression about a cravat in a sock drawer. He supposed that Armand had been a cravat, while he, himself, was socks. Grey ones. Even with his elevation to Superintendent, he couldn't pretend to match this.

Armand's voice carried from the kitchen. It was the voice of a man who had hit his stride.

There was no denying this place was nothing short of amazing. The newspapers had described it as perfect down to the last detail. That was one thing Flynn had liked about Armand - for all of his shortcomings he was a perfectionist. While most of the men were slovenly and half arsed, Armand had always been neat, efficient and he could spell. Flynn reflected that whenever Armand had signed an expense form or a timesheet he had underlined his signature. That plinth of ink had impressed Flynn. On a few occasions Flynn had absently flourished his own signature with a line, but in time he recognised the vanity - it wasn't for him to strut like a French cockerel.

Armand entered the dining room.

'I ordered a Paddys for you, Armand. And seeing it's so early, a glass of iced water.'

'You're here about the case?'

'There's that, yes. But sure I also wanted to pop in and see how you are, after the heart op . . . are you well?'

'Did you talk to Barry Murphy?'

'I did. I'll get to that. I got your resignation letter. I'm sorry if you feel that way. I know you won't believe me when I say we've missed you around the office. If we made fun of you at all it was only because you stood out – in a good way.'

'So what did he say . . . Murphy?'

'Nothing,' Flynn said. 'He had nothing to do with it. The fact is you continue to be a person of interest.'

'Still? Even though . . .'

Flynn nodded. 'Even though. I'm afraid you'll have to come in.'

Armand closed his eyes. 'You nearly killed me.'

'For a chat, that's all.'

'My doctor says no.'

Flynn huffed his breath, 'Jesus, Burke, a girl died.'

'I know, but—'

'But. But. There's no buts in this. She had two small daughters.'

But you had me questioned for nine hours straight without a break.'

'And you never asked for one. Sure you could have left at any time. You knew that.'

'And I should have. I should have told you to shove it.' Armand stood. 'Well I'm telling you now.'

'Sit, Armand . . . please.'

You can't make me, not unless you arrest me.'

'If that's what it takes . . .'

Armand sat. 'We can do it here. Right here. I'll give you five minutes. You can ask me anything you want.'

'OK.'

'Shoot.'

'Let's suppose you're right – let's surmise that you did annoy some bigwig criminal, and that he killed the girl as a warning.'

'You can surmise all you like. I know this is what happened.'

'Right. So I need to be clear on the fulcrum point that tipped him into such drastic action. According to our interrogation notes you stated that this was when you told Francis Dillon that you were aware of who his colleague, the other driver, was.'

'Yes.'

'So is the other driver your mister big?'

'No. At least I don't think so.'

Flynn flipped his notepad open. 'So who is this driver, Armand? Give me his name.'

'I don't know his name. I knew him to see. Him and a few others. It was always the same faces. It didn't matter whether I was watching for cigarettes, drugs, prostitution, tiger kidnappings. There were these same guys . . . they'd breeze in and not touch anything. They would appear one end of the city on an extortion gig, and then

they'd be the far side of town looking in on a stolen car parts operation, and there were other things . . .'

'Like?'

'Like when you stare for long enough, details emerge – signifiers; things that other people wouldn't notice. It can even be the way they package their contraband. A gang out in Tallaght were moving drugs and guns, while an inner city outfit were moving cigarettes. Each gang were parcelling out their consignments in packages that had the same grade of waxed paper and that were folded and taped in exactly the same manner. That's one thing. I've noticed many things like that over the years.'

'Maybe you were going mad sitting out in your car all night – seeing things. Sure why would your kingpin do such an awful thing as murder a girl on the back of one vague threat?'

'We covered this.'

Flynn pursed his lips. He waited.

'Well I cranked the heat up a bit,' said Armand. 'I asked a guy I know, a real mouth who I knew would put it out there. I asked him about the possibility of this one logistics gang – mentioned my suspicions to him – and he told me questions like that would get me killed. He then went on to corroborate my suspicions. He confided to me that, yes, there *is* this one individual—'

Flynn held his hand up. 'Who runs the logistics for every crime family and gang out there.'

'Yes.'

'Your cash and carry man.'

'That's right,' said Armand. 'And an expert in murder. It was a couple of days later when they put the girl in my bed.'

'And the name of your informer was . . .?'

'Harry Nugent. He runs a garage up in May Park.'

'Did run a garage,' said Flynn. 'There was a fire the other night. If it hadn't been a garage, his death would have looked awful suspicious – the shop was laced with accelerants.' Flynn closed his notepad. 'That's why I dropped by. I remembered the name, the connection.'

'This must be because of . . .'

‘You’re assuming Harry Nugent was murdered because of your line of enquiry?’

‘Without a doubt, he was.’

Flynn tented his hands and he stared from above their peak.

Like the eye of Providence, thought Armand. *Hardly, though.*

I don’t know, said Flynn. ‘I’ve seen detectives drift into fantasy. I’ve had a few of the boys sit the other side of my desk and rattle on about mad stuff, and often the whiff of Paddys on their breath. And you’d be suprised at how many of them pant on about the one criminal mastermind.’

Armand placed his tumbler of whiskey on the table. He pushed it away.

‘In our job, Armand, we see a lot of nasty people get away with a lot of nasty shit, and we eventually realise that we don’t really make a bit of difference. In the face of multifarious evil, it’s tempting to simplify, to believe there is just the one big problem that will respond to the one solution - a monster, if you like, terrorising the townsfolk – a dragon - and I look at you and I see another knight running around in his shiny armour looking for his dragon. Let’s be clear on one thing, Armand . . .’ Flynn leaned forward. He enunciated each word: ‘There. Are. No. Dragons.’

‘So this criminal . . . what I’ve been saying . . . you’re still not convinced?’

‘Convinced of what? You’ve given me nothing. You blame a phantom for the death of the girl, for the death of Harry Nugent . . . I wonder if you blame your bogey man for the fact kittens sometimes go hungry.’

‘So these boys who come apart on you, what do you tell them?’

‘Go sit in a caravan or soak up some sun.’

‘To get a grip?’

‘Yes.’

‘That girl in my bed - that’s not make believe. That happened, Flynn. They killed her.’

‘Yes. Someone did.’

‘But not my criminal mastermind?’

‘Without a name, a background . . .’ Flynn shook his head, ‘No.’

‘My God, Flynn, I have to wonder – is it cut backs? Have the ranks been so reduced that you’ve had to consolidate the good cop, bad cop? You come in here telling me I’m still on the hook, then you let on you’re agreeing with me, and now you’re back to playing the bad cop. Make up your mind, will you.’

‘More like a wavering priest, Armand. I want to believe you, but my logical mind says no.’

‘Well then I pity that poor girl’s daughters. They’ll never get justice with you on the case.’

Flynn stiffened. His lips thinned. He knew that Armand didn’t give a damn about the girl’s daughters. ‘Was it your wife?’ Flynn asked. ‘We know for a fact she was in the house that morning.’

‘Come on.’

‘I’m serious, Burke. Unless you give me a plausible alternative . . .’

‘And you accuse me of being outlandish? Maeve left the house only minutes after I did.’

‘And we have only your word for that,’ said Flynn, adding: ‘and hers.’

‘So you’re proposing that Maeve lured a prostitute into the house and strangled her?’

‘Did she?’

‘I know what you’re doing here, Flynn. You’re trying to shake me to see if anything gives.’

‘At this stage, it’s all we’ve got. That is, unless you propose a scenario we can work with.’

‘She has a rheumatic hand. She can barely squeeze a plum let alone the life from a human being. This is nonsense. Don’t you think I’ve suffered enough?’

Flynn stood and he placed his card in front of Armand. ‘I don’t want to have to bring her in. I really don’t. My direct number is there. I’ll hold off for two days.’

That evening Armand sat at his table and he contemplated the anxiety that sat indigestible in his mind. He couldn’t enjoy the dining

room – even though it was full to the brim and there was a queue in reception.

He was angry that Flynn would use Maeve as a pawn in this, but there was also the feeling that Flynn, in suggesting that Armand had become utterly disillusioned with the pointlessness of police work and had invented the one perpetrator who would absolve him of all his failures, had practically disassembled his mind and laid it on the table.

Armand knew that Flynn was a good policeman – that he had an incisive mind – and he couldn't help but be alarmed, to begin to even doubt himself.

He was at the point of going home when Charles appeared with two men. Armand knew them by their discomfort and their hard faces. They were criminal – one weasly and skittish, and the other brutish. *A goblin and a troll*, thought Armand.

Charles showed them to a table. Armand switched to the receiver for that table. The goblin was talking.

‘So she has it I’m doin’ shift work down in Moville. Ya know? – sittin’ in a Portakabin countin’ the stars. While in fact I’m bonin’ some bint in the back of me friggin’ van.’

The troll laughed.

‘And a real dirty old geebag at that – like I’m talkin’ a gowl on her like a donkey’s yawn. I’m tellin’ ya – it’s worse I’m gettin’! So anyway, it seems every time I leave the flat I’m comin’ home to all o’ these bleedin’ accusations. Now this bein’ the mother of me children, it’s not like I can answer her every question with the back o’ me hand. I gotta maintain a certain environment in the home. So I’m headin’ back and I’m thinkin’ fuck me, I’m smellin’ like a tart’s blouse here. So I stop by a chemists and I pick her up a bottle of contact lens solution. I get home, and of course she’s off on one: You’ve been with some bitch, you wanker. I can smell her fucking perfume!

So I’m like all deeply offended here, and I present her with the contact lens solution and I says to her: I stopped by the chemist on the way back from work and while queuing up to buy this – for you!

– I happened to sample a mix of the aftershave testers!’ He laughed, ‘Jasus, she couldn’t do enough to make it up to me after that.’

The waiter poured water to their glasses and asked them if they would like to order drinks.

‘Yeah, tell us, Horsebox. I’m only seein’ some bottled beer on this menu here – Heineken ‘n Stella. How ‘bout a couple of pints like a good lad?’

‘I’m sorry, sir, but Nestor Magill’s serves only bottled beer.’

‘And this is supposed to be the best place in town. Stella, then. Dos Stella, por favor.’

The waiter departed and returned with two bottles. The men ignored the glasses and drank from the neck. The goblin picked up a menu. ‘This is all in . . . you speak French, Plank?’

They both laughed.

‘We can let our man do the honours – he’s so far up his own arse with this kinda stuff, let *him* figure it out. And of course the prick is late. Always late. He’s like the fuckin’ bride.

You know this gobshite gave me the heel of a Beretta once. See this mark? You can make out the stippling from the grip.’ The goblin leaned forward and lifted his fringe. ‘Couldn’t tell me arse from me elbow for two days.’

‘Like why’d he smack ya one?’ asked the troll.

‘You’re gonna love this. I was scopin’ a bar for . . . Remember that mouthy fuck we corpsed – the journo? The car?’

‘Malone?’

Armand stopped breathing. His heart began to pound.

‘Yeah, but don’t be sayin’ his name, ya thick ya. His handle was T-Bone. Remember? Well I was doin’ the recce on that gig, like getting’ the overview on his movements – his regular fag bar haunts and shit. Mother o’ Jesus – don’t I get all the poxy gigs? Well I’m sittin’ on me arse all day in some poncey bar, and it’s like there’s not a sight nor sound of this cunt, so I ducked in to a barber’s next door and I got meself a haircut.’

Plank laughed.

‘But it wasn’t so funny when our man here finds out. He reports up the line and word comes down from Double Ugly that I should

get a slap, like somethin' mild – ya know? So your man here – he never liked me, so he sees this as an opportunity to give me a tap of his gun. Above and beyond the call of duty. That's our boy. A fuckin' hero.'

'Jasus.'

'I know. And anyway, as I said in me defence: My hair grew on Double U's time, so why shouldn't I get it cut on his time?!'

They both laughed.

Armand released his breath in an articulated gasp: 'Malone.'

The third member of their group arrived. Armand saw him in profile, and he wondered – *could it be?* When he reached the table and took his seat, his eyes found Armand and he winked. It *was* - the other driver.

The Goblin's voice came over the receiver: 'Wha's the craic, horsebox?'

The new arrival ignored the greeting. 'You ordered?' he asked.

'We thought we'd wait,' said the goblin.

'There's steaks here. You guys want steak?'

They grunted assent.

'And what you drinking that shit for? We're marking a job well done here. Upstairs wants us to celebrate. If word goes up that you were sucking beers . . . I'm gonna order champagne and we're gonna drink it.'

He raised his arm and clicked three times. He ordered the cheapest bottle.

The champagne arrived and they raised a toast without enthusiasm. The driver stood. 'I'm goin' for a slash.'

Once he was gone, the goblin leaned across to Plank and he said: 'He's goin' for a bump, you wait and see – he'll be back here talkin' a mile a friggin' minute. I'd love to put Double U straight on this prick. He'd lay him out. And this shit about a celebration. Everyone else will get a piece of that, and you can do the maths – come to think of it, you probably can't - but by my estimation there must have been a full consignment there; like we're talkin' millions. And what do we get? A steak and some fizzy feckin' wine.'

At that moment Charles led two diners to Armand's table.

‘Armand,’ he said, ‘I’d like you to meet a man who requires no introduction.’

Armand stood, ‘Minister Nash, it’s a pleasure to meet you.’

‘Call me Barry.’ The Minister of Education pumped Armand’s hand. ‘You’ve a first rate restaurant here, Monsieur Bertonneau.’

‘And his enchanting wife, Muriel,’ said Charles.

Muriel was plump, pink and tightly upholstered. She extended a gloved hand. Armand squeezed it.

‘Charmed to make your acquaintance,’ she said grandly, and Armand noted she was drunk.

‘Thank you both,’ said Armand. ‘May I ask what you chose from the menu this evening?’

‘The soup and the steak,’ said Minister Nash. ‘And it was *fucking* delicious.’

Charles winced. He recovered his smile and asked if they would care for a digestif, courtesy of the house. Damn right they would – ha, ha, ha! Minister Nash and his wife pushed in to Armand’s banquettes with much puffing and laughter. Armand removed the ear piece.

The goblin passed by with an unlit cigarette hanging from his lip. Even though Armand didn’t outright recognise his face, there was something that felt like recognition: it wasn’t so much a dawning – it was a clench, a fearful instinctive recognition.

When the Minister and his wife departed to attend to – as the minister had said with his honking laugh - matters of State, Charles came over and he told Armand that table eighteen was refusing to leave.

‘That’s alright, Charles. I’ll deal with it.’

‘They called me fat . . . a jumped up pig. That’s what one of them said.’

Armand looked at the criminals. They were laughing. ‘You’re not fat, Charles. Their type is vicious. They take pleasure in hurting people.’

Charles said something more, but Armand didn’t hear him. He didn’t hear the hundred and twenty voices in the room, nor the two

hundred and forty utensils tapping at the plates. He was on his feet. Table eighteen loomed. Their leers widened. This face that had been tunnelled by Armand's viewing scope was now tunnelled by a dark faint that was closing around his field of vision. Armand looked him in the eye and he knew they were the eyes of a killer, habituated to assess not by looks or bearing or style, but to judge a man by his ability to withstand assault.

'Is there a problem?' asked Armand.

'No,' said Scarface 'not unless you have one.'

'I understand you are reluctant to return this table.'

'We're not finished.'

'Well the fact is that we have another party arriving in ten minutes. They have booked this table for nine pm.'

'Well they can fuck off because we're not finished.'

'You know you got a spot on your nose,' said the goblin.

Armand kept his eyes on Scarface. He willed on his legs, his voice.

Plank put in with a surprised: 'Hey, you're that . . .'

'The policeman who killed a hooker,' said Scarface.

Armand glanced around. The adjoining tables were watching, as was the bread and water boy. Armand felt a flash of anger that this boy would stand rubbernecking.

'I suggest that you leave, gentlemen. Otherwise I *will* call the Guards.'

The goblin and the troll laughed. Scarface stared. 'Very well,' he said. 'We don't want to be wasting police time on the fact we gotta skip dessert, not when they have a former colleague to investigate.'

Armand returned to his table and he drank a glass of water. He became aware of the hammering of his heart – it caused his body to tremble. He extended his fingers - they vibrated like the outer limits of a landslide – and he was sure his heart would explode and he would tip to the floor and the last words he would hear would be a cry out for a doctor

He opened his eyes. Charles was waving from the reception. He gestured for Armand to come over.

'They've been stolen!' he cried.

‘What have?’

‘The credit card terminals. All of them. And look!’

Charles pointed to the cables that ran from the cash register. Each of them had been sliced. Armand realised the remaining covers would be on the house.

