
BELFAST — DUNDALK

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON, we find Maggie at the Belfast Central Station while we're waiting for the train that's supposed to take us back to Dublin. She's only twenty-three, a girl really, with short red-brunette hair, a long face, and hazel eyes that had seemed rather dull when we first approached her but have sparkled since the moment she looked up and found that Mia was speaking to *her* of all people. I have no idea *why* we approached her. But by the way Mia is acting, it was very much a deliberate move, though I don't think it was planned.

The girl speaks non-stop the entire train ride, sitting next to Mia while I sit across from them, which irritates me to no end. Somewhere behind me, someone starts spraying an inordinate amount of underarm deodorant. It goes on and on and on —*pshht pshht— pshhhhhht!*—and it soon creates a fog in our little section of the car. Mia is bemused by this while Maggie blushes crimson out of utter humiliation. Me? I'm startled. I didn't know people still use spray-on deodorant. I tried it once, when I was much too young but wanting to appear “grown up” in front of my sisters. I ended up spraying myself in the face.

We eventually arrive at a station that reminds me of a T-

stop back home but I don't know why we're here. I don't even know how we ended up on this train, but when Maggie leads us down to a scruffy little parking lot where there's a scruffy little hatchback that used to be red and now smells of sheep, I get the feeling that we won't be returning to Dublin anytime soon.

I look to Mia, but all she gives me in return is a knowing smile as she holds the passenger seat forward, allowing me to climb into the back and squeeze myself in beside a box clearly marked *Ovine Suppositories—Not for Human Consumption. Keep Out of Mouths of Children and Infants.*

Jesus, my clothes are going to smell funny after this.

Anyway, the stinky little hatchback rattles and shimmies as Maggie grinds it through its gears up out of the town and into a region of rolling hills and single-lane roads that are really nothing more than two muddy tire tracks separated by moss. Every vehicle coming in the other direction is an exercise in patient maneuvering as one squeezes by the other in the narrow space defined by stone walls so overgrown with brambles and vines that it's hard to imagine that there are walls under there somewhere. I don't know what the rules are, over who does the waiting and who does the passing, but it's apparently a given that, at some point, both vehicles must come to a stop so that windows can be rolled down and pleasantries exchanged. Much of this is a show on Maggie's part, I think. A demonstration to the neighbors of her own worldliness. I don't think people like these encounter people like us very often.

We arrive at an ancient farmhouse, built almost entirely out of rocks and twigs and moss and the stuff you find at the back of the freezer, sitting somewhat forlornly atop a rather bleak and barren knoll that overlooks a valley where sheep run like packs of wild dogs and everything is so verdant that I wonder if Tourism Ireland just goes around the country and paints things a brilliant, blinding green for the sake of us tourists because it's

what we expect of Ireland. Maggie hangs out the window as she beckons to Uncle Brick (I *think* that's what she called him but her accent is rather impenetrable), a lumbering sort of man who's stomping his way up from a paddock with his hands deep in the pockets of his coveralls. He stops and watches us in bewilderment as Maggie brings the little car around in a looping circle of the muddy courtyard. She climbs out and calls to him, waving him over enthusiastically, wanting to show off what she's brought back from the city.

He smiles in a manner that probably reflects the befuddled expression I'm displaying as he shakes hands with Mia. (He first wipes that hand clean on the leg of his coveralls, which are clearly not clean.) He then turns to me, thrusts his huge, not-so-clean hand out so that it hovers right before my face, and says "*Feckin' Jaysus, this wee thin' is a dark'n, ain't she?*"

Dragging Uncle Brick off by the cuff, Maggie speaks at him with a brogue so thick that I cannot understand the words but I understand the intent. After that, the only thing I get out of him is a sheepish grin, which I don't mean to sound cute.

"I AM *certain* that you're with the CIA."

Jesus, woman! Even if I were, do you think I would just give up? Spill all the state secrets simply because I can no longer endure the badgering?

A few times, I seriously consider it.

I glance over at Uncle Brick, who leans against the large stone farmer's sink, resting an open bottle of Heineken on top of his stomach as he stares at the slate floor beyond his feet. I can't see his face clearly, not in the light of the single fixture that hangs down from the low ceiling near the middle of the kitchen, because even though he leans a little lower than his full height, his head is still higher than where the light can reach. He's a

good foot-and-a-half taller than me, and two feet wider. He has to dodge around the fixture whenever he crosses the room.

The kitchen is massive, but most of it is in shadows where I search occasionally in the hope of finding Mia. I haven't seen her nor Maggie in some time. They had disappeared, going to check on Grams in the front room where an immobile woman sits under a pile of quilts and afghans, quietly watching an old CRT television with the sound off because she's lost her hearing anyway. They have to check, Maggie said, that a log hasn't rolled out of the small fireplace, crossed the small room, and set Grams on fire, which has happened on more than one occasion from what I can tell.

So why are they taking so long? Are they trying to put Grams out?

Auntie Beth repeats her accusation—for about the *hundredth* time—pointing her long, bony finger at me and peering down its length as if it's a rifle and she's shooting the spy. She's holding herself up with one arm propped on the edge of a free-standing piece of furniture—a dish cabinet or something of that sort—that's pushed up against the wall on the other side of the circle of light. She's nothing more than a shape, a form without detail except for the sheep-shit-covered pair of wellies on her feet. Those I can see.

I had politely declined the Heineken Uncle Brick had offered me earlier, and now I wish I hadn't. I'm too tired to be drinking, but I'm also too tired to put up with this crap.

Why isn't Uncle Brick saying anything? He's obviously embarrassed. I can sense it by the way he's slouching. His shoulders started to sag about the time Auntie Beth started on her third tumbler of whiskey—the tumbler she holds carelessly with the fingertips of the same hand she's using to point at me. The liquid sloshes, glowing from the light that the cut crystal captures and amplifies so that it illuminates the underside of her

chin, making her ancient face even more scary. Auntie Beth is somewhere between eighty and a hundred and fifty.

I still haven't figured out how, exactly, Auntie Beth and Uncle Brick are related, but I'm pretty sure they aren't *married* to one another. Not even brother and sister—they're missing that extra bit of closeness that comes from a shared childhood. Maybe cousins. Or maybe Mr. Auntie Beth, the late diplomat husband, was Uncle Brick's brother, meaning these two are related only by law. But then, who is Grams? And how does Maggie relate to all of them? Maybe this old sheep farm is really a madhouse and she's its director.

Auntie Beth is now saying that she's *certain* that I'm "one of the chaps," the phrase her husband used when referring to supposed CIA operatives in East Pakistan back in the 1950s. He would point out all the "American chaps" to his wife, as they sat in the tea rooms of South Asia, so she says she knows how to spot one now. I doubt very much that I look like anyone she might've seen back then, except for maybe the person serving them their tea or gin and tonics. Her husband was "one of the lads," meaning MI6, by his own assertion, but I'm guessing that he was MI6 like everyone in the Army says they're Special Forces.

"They let your type in now," Auntie Beth informs me.

When she then starts going on about the *dark boys* who were the servants in their home in East Pakistan, I wish Uncle Brick would just get over himself and say something. *Any damned thing!* (Though I keep imagining that anything he might add to the conversation would primarily consist of "*Feckin' Jaysus...*," which, at this point, would not only be acceptable but I'd say downright appropriate.)

The *dark boys* were even darker than me, according to Auntie Beth. She's on her fifth glass of whiskey, at least, and I'm hoping that the next swallow will finally shut down her brain

and send her sprawling onto the slate. This woman's stamina is *amazing*. And the cabinet she leans against is made of much sturdier stuff than it looks.

She tells me of how they had *one dark boy who was very lovely. Very precious to look at. He would help me undress, when it was hot and Colin was away on duty*. She pauses to cool her leathered cheeks with the side of the tumbler. *Not that anything untoward happened, mind you. Such things were never done back in the day. Not with the darkies. At least, not among proper women of the Empire*. (Yes, she says "of the Empire" and, yes, she means "white.") Her tone, though, hints that she kind of wishes that she hadn't been so proper, *back in the day*.

Heilige kak! We traveled over three thousand miles to end up in the kitchen of a regret-filled, horny old racist sheep farmer.

Jesus, Grams better be crispy cinders at this point!

"YOU ARE WITH THE CIA. I *know* it."

Just kill me!

Or kill her!

Jesus, I miss the feel of a weapon on my hip.

The next time I call Bouchard, I'm thinking of telling him that I give up. I'm coming home because East Boston is far preferable to this. I still don't know what the hell we're doing—there, or in Belfast, or in Dublin. What do they think Mia is up to anyway? Bouchard never told me. He told me very little because he—or they, or the Pope—do not want to prejudice my reports. So how am I supposed to know if my standing here, taking this crap off this old drunk, means a *damned thing* to anyone but me?

"She's not CIA."

I jump, not expecting to hear anything coming from behind me, and Mia coos an apology when she sees how much I'm star-

ted. She and Maggie enter together but Mia comes around the massive table I'm leaning against and takes a place at my side, putting her arm across my back so she can rest her hand on my good shoulder. Maggie crosses under the light to Uncle Brick, accepting two bottles from him and bringing one over to Mia. She then steps back, waiting, as they all are, because of the way Mia had made the statement. There's a sense that she has something more to add. They're watching her, watching me, and I can only glance around at the shapes of people in the shadows. Auntie Beth is leaning forward in anticipation, or the alcohol's finally getting the better of her and she's about to land flat on her face. I'm hoping for the latter, even if it's mean, but she shows me that it's the former by lifting her tumbler in front of her face and peering down that damned finger at me again.

Say it, you horny old woman! "Pew! Pew!"

"She's FBI."

There's a moment where no one responds, until Uncle Brick gives a snort and shakes his head in disbelief as he takes another swig from his bottle. Auntie Beth smiles, her face looking demonic the way it's half in the circle of light, jabbing her finger in my direction to say *I told you so*. Maggie stands there, in the middle of the floor, looking around as though she's just found herself the only one in the room who isn't in on the joke.

I pull the hair on my left side forward, hiding the scars that must be standing out dark and terrible because I can feel my face become pallid. My fingers are suddenly numb, swollen. I don't look at Mia, so I can't see whether she's being serious, but she lets me know with a gentle squeeze of my shoulder.

She's serious.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native-born Foreign Service brat, Eric Serrell was given the opportunity to live in some of the lesser visited corners of the globe on someone else's dime. ***Don't Tell Mom About This*** is Eric's second work of his own after ghostwriting a number of novels that went on to become bestsellers and award winners. His first novel, ***Fall Rotten***, debuted in the summer of 2019 and he is currently completing his third book.

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