

The Rosary Garden

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1

Dublin, 1984

It was good to be early. A step ahead. He cruised the car to a gentle stop on the canal side of the street and killed the lights. There was a little humpback bridge at the end of the road with a lantern on the top of it. Pretty as a postcard. Through the arch of the bridge he could just make out a wall of water falling over a lock gate, a shadowy unspooling that sounded like someone exhaling for ever. It was good to watch, took the edge off his nerves.

On the dot of eight, a light came on behind the splayed bones of a fanlight. The door below opened and she appeared – silhouetted, alone. It looked like she had nothing but a small case with her and disappointment flooded him, but then he noticed the crossing of one arm over her chest, the way she leaned back as she came down the stone steps.

She stepped into the fall of a street lamp and he could see the bulge of her coat more clearly. It was good that she was trying to be discreet, even if the result was ludicrously noticeable. Luckily there was nobody else on the road to see. He scanned the front of the terrace again for movement at windows. Nothing. The trees along the canal were

in full leaf, blocking the buildings on the other side from sight.

He rolled down the window.

‘Here!’

Her head swivelled in his direction.

Steady!

He called her name gently. Better to stay in the car, make her come to him.

She crossed the street and he reached over to open the passenger door for her. She put the case in the footwell and lowered herself slowly in beside him. He didn’t want to look at her, so he fiddled with the keys.

‘How’re ya?’ Her face was coming towards him. He ducked down and started the engine. ‘We’ll drive round a bit, eh?’

He checked his mirrors, pulled out slowly. He wasn’t sure where he was going, but it seemed a good idea to get moving.

‘No one saw me leaving,’ she said.

He looked in the rear-view mirror.

‘No one saw me. I did well, didn’t I?’

She was such a poultice.

‘Sure you did,’ he said.

Her hand was still clamped to the front of her coat where the lump was, and she started to stroke the material above it. He should have told her to put it in the back.

They were headed into the city centre now. He didn’t want to go too far, didn’t want to get lost. Get her to hand it over, drop her at the train station. That’s all.

‘Tell me again about the family?’ she asked.

‘They’re rich, cultured people. Aristocracy, I suppose you’d call them. Big house, ponies. She’ll have the life of a princess over there.’

‘They won’t send her to boarding school?’

‘No, they were very against that,’ he said and made himself touch her, put his hand flat on her thigh and give a little squeeze. She’d put on the beef.

‘What matters is that we get a fresh start,’ he said. ‘Nobody pulling us this way and that.’

She covered his hand with her own.

They were driving round Stephen’s Green. Round and round. She didn’t seem to notice that they were going nowhere. A set of lights changed to red and he took the chance to retrieve his hand.

‘I have a little bed for her in the back.’

She twisted to look. It was only a laundry basket, but he thought it looked the business, padded out with sheets and things.

‘I’ll pull in up here and you can put her in, eh?’

He could feel her reluctance fluttering beside him.

‘We won’t let them bully us,’ he said, ‘will we?’

‘No,’ she said, ‘we won’t.’

The word *we* was all that was needed. He applied it sparingly, knowing she’d do what he wanted, for the hope it contained. She was too easily swayed. Soft in the head, really. She would have made a terrible mother.

2

Fitz and Ali were late. They got to the door of the nuns' parlour in time to hear the dry beat of a pair of clapping hands rise through a babble of voices.

Ali cracked the door open. Reverend Mother Mary Paul looked in their direction, one sceptical eyebrow raised even as she continued to clap for silence. The feeling of dread was only a reflex – Ali had to remind herself that the nun had no hold over them now.

A dozen of their former classmates gathered around in an untidy horseshoe with a few nuns and older lay teachers. Some big sheets of paper were pinned to the wall. GOOD LUCK TO OUR BRAINBOXES was painted across them, each awkward letter wrought in a different style and colour. An art project for reluctant first-years, probably. Ali tried to tuck herself out of sight behind a pair of teachers, slumping to lose height.

Fitz had insisted that they dress up for the occasion – their first time at St Brigid's without uniforms. She'd persuaded Ali to backcomb her hair and put on a baggy pinafore dress. With kohl round her eyes, she had looked bohemian in her bedroom mirror. Now she felt like a big demented farmgirl.

Mary Paul cleared her throat.

‘Now that we’re all *here*,’ she directed a quick nod at Fitz, ‘I wanted to express how very, very proud I am of the girls from our class of 1984 who are aiming to move on to university and third-level colleges. We hope there will be twelve of you who will be successful in this, if your results are good enough, and I have to say this would be a very proud result for St Brigid’s, and a testament to the fine quality of teachers that we have here.’

Wrinkled faces creased deeper into smiles and a lukewarm spatter of applause emerged from the girls. Ali looked around and was relieved to see a couple of the others had also dressed for effect, one in a leather biker’s jacket, another in a rainbow jumper down to her knees.

‘I couldn’t be prouder of your achievements, which is why you’ll heed me when I say that wherever your God-given brains take you – to the highest levels of commerce or the halls of academe, or even the furthest reaches of the known world – promise me that you will not deprive yourselves of the real joys of womanhood. The fruits of the material world are very seductive, but they can’t replace the simple satisfactions of home and family. Ireland needs intelligent mothers and wives just as much as she needs bankers and doctors. Think about that, and remember you can come back to see us at any time.’ She raised her hands in exhortation: ‘Our doors are always open!’

Again the girls clapped dutifully, eyes drifting to the buffet table.

‘What the hell is the “known world” anyway?’ Ali said sideways to Fitz. ‘Does she think there’s still a big undiscovered bit somewhere?’

‘Don’t be worrying your womanly brain with that.’

‘How long do we have to stay?’

‘Give it ten minutes, max. I can’t look at that food with this hangover.’ Fitz made a gagging face. Ali was ravenous.

With a bit of shuffling, Ali manoeuvred herself into prime position at the table and put three triangular ham sandwiches onto her paper plate. She was edging her way towards the cocktail sausages when a tremulous black shape docked beside her.

‘Alison Hogan. Don’t you look great?’

Tiny Sister O’Dwyer, not the worst of them. Long past teaching, but still in nominal charge of the gardening club, which Ali had joined in her first year and signed up for ever since, not entirely for horticultural reasons.

The nun’s raw-looking fingers were already locked on Ali’s sleeve, and she decided to give herself up to the old soul. It was easier than fighting her off, and more bearable company than she might otherwise get landed with. She peeled another paper plate from a stack, urged the nun to accept a finger of quiche and steered her to a pair of the straight-backed chairs that ringed the room.

Ali wolfed down her food while the nun talked about her gratitude for all that Ali had done for the Rosary Garden, stirring the air with her untouched plate.

‘There’s not many girls would put in the effort, but you and your friend Carmen – what is it you call her: Fuzz?’

‘Fitz, Sister.’

‘Well, you were both great. Always there at lunchtime. To be honest, it’s become a trouble rather than a pleasure to me lately. You need to be able to get down on your

knees in a garden, even more than in the chapel. The weeds would break your heart.'

'Sure, you'll get some new girls, Sister. Some young ones, with plenty of bend in them.'

'I suppose. It won't be me that trains them up, though. Sister Bernadette's taking over.'

Sister O'Dwyer nodded towards a tall nun who was talking intensely with Fitz. Sister Bernadette was known among the girls as Red Bernie, but Ali had never been sure whether it was because of the ginger hair that peeked out of the band of her short veil or her attachment to social justice. She was always recruiting girls to visit hospices or crochet blankets for Africa.

Mother Mary Paul clapped again, sharp as a rifle shot, and announced that there would be prayers of thanksgiving in the chapel. Ali saw Sister Bernadette turn away from Fitz to put her plate down, and Fitz took the chance to signal to Ali. She held two fingers up to her lips, blew through them and pulled an invisible cigarette from her mouth.

'Is she blowing a kiss at you?' asked Sister O'Dwyer, alert to any hints of an unsuitable attachment.

'No, it's something else.'

Fitz was pointing towards the window now and Ali nodded her head.

'What's she doing?' said the nun.

'Let me help you up, Sister.'

It took a minute to ease Sister O'Dwyer into the small herd shuffling towards the chapel. Ali stepped back into the emptying parlour, where a couple of younger nuns in big blue aprons were clearing the tables. Fitz had disappeared.

She retrieved her overnight bag from under a chair and hurried back out into the corridor. One side was lined with glass cases full of dull geological specimens and stuffed animals whose fur had been bleached blonde by decades of sunlight slanting through the windows opposite. All these familiar things. She passed the arched alcove that housed a mural of the Assumption, Mary taking off into the wild blue, supported by a cushion of disembodied angel heads. Down the big staircase next, her lone footsteps echoing up through the cold hallways, the empty classrooms, the ranks of desks.

I never have to come back again. She was almost running now, past the cloakrooms to the double doors that led to the grounds. One push and she was out, the sun streaming down.

She thought Fitz would be right there, but she wasn't. She must have gone on to their usual smoking spot. Ali walked on into the grounds. The nets sagged on the tennis courts, weeds sprouting at the bottom of the chain-link fence. Summer-holiday shutdown. Passing the junior-school windows, she could see tiny chairs stacked up on tables.

She turned down the broad path that led to the Rosary Walk and climbed the four steps up to its gravel surface. Stone slabs, like miniature tombstones, flanked either side at regular intervals, ten on the left, ten on the right. Each slab bore a tile showing a scene from the life of the Virgin. The idea was to say your rosary while you walked, and if you got the pace right, you'd reach a slab at the end of each Hail Mary, completing a ten-prayer decade by the

time you'd walked the length. It depended how fast you prayed, of course. Or walked. Before you turned round for the return decade, you could contemplate a life-size statue of the Pietà at the path's end, a whitewash-blurred tableau of the dead Christ balanced on his mother's knees. Mary looked down so calmly at the distorted corpse, oblivious to the strain on her thighs.

Halfway along the walk, a path led off to a small gate in a thick hedge. Ali lifted the latch and entered the shade of the Rosary Garden. She remembered Sister O'Dwyer telling them that the trees around it had been planted to shelter the little garden from the winds that blew down across the fields from the Dublin Mountains. That must have been a long time ago, for nowadays the garden was shaded to the point of gloom and the fields had become housing estates. With the trees in full leaf, it had an almost underwater feel, faint dapples of light moving across ivy-filled beds. A tiny building stood in one corner, all dimpled windows and painted-on beams. It looked like something from a Grimm fairy tale, but it was just the garden shed.

Ali scanned the garden. Perhaps Fitz had got caught up with the chapel crowd after all. A twig snapped somewhere nearby, and a blackbird flew from a hedge.

She moved deeper into the garden. Another sound reached her ears, a kind of high whimpering. It was coming from the direction of the shed, and now she noticed that the door was half open.

'Hello?'

'Aa – li?' The voice that came from inside the shed was Fitz's but sounded weirdly stretched. Ali's skin prickled.

She pushed the door open. Fitz was standing in the middle of the shed, her face as pale as milk and her fingers at her mouth. A smear of lipstick trailed across one cheek. She appeared to be standing in a nest of gardening tools – hoes, rakes and loppers meshed around her ankles. Her eyes were fixed on the floor: on a wire basket filled with smaller tools. Ali picked up a fallen rake that blocked her way, propped it against the wall. As she turned back she noticed a large mushroom or egg nestled among the tools in the basket. She wanted to go to Fitz, to free her from the tangle of handles – but she couldn't make sense of this thing. She stepped closer, wondering at the fuzzy halo around the edge of the egg.

Downy hair on a head.

Ali's vision blurred and wavered. She moved a little to the side and the object resolved itself – couldn't be undone now – as the top of a baby's head. She took another step towards Fitz and the body of the baby appeared, shoulders wrapped in white and the rest hidden by a brown paper bag. The rusting blades of pruning saws and secateurs bristled behind its head, but the baby was unmarked, and perfectly still.

'I was looking for matches,' said Fitz.

The baby's eyes were closed, but its open mouth was dry and flaking around the lips, and a horrible darkness brimmed inside. She waited for it to move.

'I was just looking for matches.'

Ali pulled her eyes towards her friend.

'For a fag,' said Fitz.

'C'mon!' Ali grabbed her arm and propelled Fitz out of the tumble of shed and into the garden.

Then they were running back to the school in a kind of dreamtime, slow and heavy, and her throat ached. Sister Bernadette appeared suddenly on the path in front of them, from nowhere, and Fitz ran ahead to her, streaming words.

The nun took control – Fitz was to go on to the school and get help, Ali was to come back with her, show her the place.

They ran shoulder-to-shoulder along the Rosary Walk and plunged into the garden. When they reached the door of the shed, Ali stood aside to let Sister Bernadette go in on her own. There was a long silence, a gap in time, before the nun reappeared, her face distraught, the features pulling themselves apart. She thrust an old china cup at Ali's stomach.

'Get me some water,' she said.

'What?'

'Go on.'

It wasn't until Ali was at the tap that she realised what her errand was. If the nun wanted to baptise the baby, perhaps it was alive. She hurried back, holding the sloshing cup at arm's length.

Sister Bernadette was waiting outside the shed, the child cradled in her arms. As she shifted her hold to reach for the cup, Ali was sure the baby's head moved.

'Is it going to be all right?'

But the nun just glared at her, then bent her head close in to the baby's, mumbling unsteady lines of prayer under her breath. She poured the water in a thin line over the child's face. It didn't flinch. Sudden tears fell from Bernadette's eyes onto the baby's still cheek, salt water following

fresh. Ali noticed the baby was now wrapped in her own paisley-print scarf, and that her overnight bag was open on the ground.

Bernadette lifted a corner of the scarf to wipe the baby's face.

'That's mine,' Ali said.

Sister Bernadette turned hot eyes on her.

'You're a trivial, stupid girl, do you know that?'

She tugged the material in agitation, and the body of the child rolled in response, the cloth falling away to reveal a great purple bloom covering its back and neck.

An acid gush filled Ali's throat even as Bernadette moved to cover the little body again, now so obviously lifeless and broken. A crackle of static travelled through the air, a radio rasp. Ali turned to look at the gate, where the silver buttons on several Garda uniforms flashed in the bright sunlight beyond the garden.

3

A line of nuns occupied the six plastic chairs in the reception area of Rathmines Garda station. Vincent Swan could feel their eyes on his back as he walked up to the front desk and introduced himself.

‘Detective Inspector Swan ... from HQ.’ Some old instinct kept his voice low.

The Garda at the desk nodded and disappeared. Swan tried a casual glance behind, but the nuns were still staring, except for an ancient one on the end, who had bent to her beads.

He had dropped Elizabeth at the station that morning, and the late start led to him working through lunch. When the call came, he was the only one in the office.

Swan would have preferred to go straight to the school, have a look at the scene and check that the tech guys were doing their thing, but the Rathmines chief, Munnelly, was anxious to get his station clear of nuns before the papers got a sniff of it. Swan could have pointed out it was Munnelly’s fault for bringing them to the station in the first place, but there was no use getting retrospective. You just had to work from where you stood.

The desk Garda came back and pointed Swan to a side corridor where Superintendent Munnelly was waiting.

There was often a bit of jockeying when the murder squad was called in to assist the local Gardaí, but Munnelly didn't look put out. A little distracted and nervous, if anything. He led Swan to a back office for a briefing with the Gardaí who'd been first on the scene and a couple of women officers who'd been taking statements.

They ran through the facts of the incident quickly: where the child had been found and the apparent cause of death. The two schoolgirls who found the baby, and a nun they brought to the scene, were now at the station and had given initial statements. Yes, they'd been held separately; and yes, their stories tallied – mostly. But the nuns in reception were refusing to leave until their sister nun was free to go.

'How do you mean: their stories tally *mostly*?'

'There was some disturbance of the scene, sir.' This was from the youngest-looking Guard, a lanky fellow with crinkly hair.

'You were there?'

'Yes, sir. The nun moved the infant for the purposes of baptism, sir.'

'Why? The child was dead, I thought.'

The Garda shrugged. 'In case it hadn't been before?'

'So she moved it—'

'And poured water on it.'

'And rearranged the shed,' Munnelly added with a sigh.

'We answer to different authorities, eh?'

Swan held his tongue. He said he would start with the first girl who found the child.

'Carmen Fitzgerald.'

'Yes.'

The interview with the Fitzgerald girl didn't take long. She was a nervous little thing and too upset to be fully coherent. She kept going on about matches and cigarettes. He'd expected her to be wearing some kind of uniform, but she was in jeans and a blouse, with smeared scarlet lipstick on her mouth, and mascara under her eyes. Not like the schoolgirls of his day.

'What year are you in?'

'I'm not in any year. We left in June.'

'I don't understand. Why were you in school?'

'They had us back for a reception. The ones who were going to college. Can I go home soon?'

Home would be a nice house in Rathgar, or some other leafy address. No wonder she was upset. She was the kind of girl that bad things shouldn't happen to. After the good school, she would probably take an arts degree at college, maybe spend a year in Florence or Paris and return to tennis clubs, marriage, children with cod-Irish names.

'Off you go. We might have to talk again.' Swan turned to the Guard by the door. 'Can we give Miss Fitzgerald a lift to ... where is it, pet?'

'Eh ... Donnybrook.'

Close enough.

As the girl left, Munnelly came in. 'Do you think you could see the nun now?'

Swan pretended to consult his notes before agreeing.

He hadn't been close up with a nun since he was ten and at national school. They hadn't been especially cruel to him, though they were quick enough to snap a ruler

across small knuckles. Back then he had a dread of them just because they were so alien-looking – towering pillars of blackness. When they patrolled the aisles of desks, the folds of their habits would brush against your bare arm or leg, soft and cold.

This nun was younger than he expected, pale and tall, with a touch of Deborah Kerr about her. He read her statement aloud and she listened solemnly, absolutely still.

‘I have a few questions,’ Swan said, putting the page down on the table.

‘And I have one for you.’

‘You go first,’ said Swan.

‘The baby. Where is she now?’

‘I haven’t been to the school yet, but I expect the body is still there while our officers piece things together. Then it’ll be brought to our mortuary.’

Sister Bernadette raised her hands to the table, watching her fingers slowly interlace as if they had a life of their own.

‘And then?’ She addressed her hands.

‘Hopefully, we find her people and there can be a burial.’

‘If there is anything our order can do ...’

‘Sister, my doctrine is a little rusty – what was the point in baptising a dead child? Surely its soul had already departed.’

The look she gave him had only a hint of pity in it.

‘There is always a point in doing what you can.’

‘You said in your statement that the child was naked when you took it from the bag?’

‘I found something to cover her with, something to hand. I didn’t want people – the girl was with me – to see it.’