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Opening Extract from...

Downturn Abbey

Written by Ross O'Carroll-Kelly
(as told to Paul Howard)

Illustrated by Alan Clarke

Published by Penguin Ireland

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ROSS O'CARROLL-KELLY
(as told to Paul Howard)

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ALAN CLARKE

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For my friend, Eoin Hennigan. Dearly missed.

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Prologue: *How Nice!*

I'm watching her in the orangery, with the autumn sun on her face, running her hand along the exposed red brickwork wall, half smiling, but half confused, like someone from the Midlands having the digital switchover explained to them – kind of getting it, but at the same time thinking, 'Is that even English I'm listening to?'

She says we might actually put the piano in here. Her voice echoes off the walls of the big, empty room. She says she's always, like, *wanted* a music room? She can play a load of shit on the piano and she reached grade four on either the piccolo or the bassoon – I can never remember which.

'Oh my God,' she goes. 'I would love it if Honor discovered what an amazing, amazing thing music can, like, *be*?'

We're suddenly watching our six-year-old daughter through the window, stomping around the gorden while pointing her iPhone to the heavens, to try to find more than a single bor of coverage. 'For fock's sake,' she's going, 'it's supposed to be actual *Killiney*?' First World problems. That's a phrase my old man sometimes uses.

In the space of, like, three days our lives have changed and there's a lot for us all to suddenly take in. Sorcha, especially, is still struggling to get her head around the fact that her childhood home, the famous Honalee on the Vico Road – described by the *Irish Times* property supplement as 'well-appointed' and 'contemporary, yet at once classic' and by An Taisce as 'a permanent blight on what is otherwise one of the most beautiful bays in Europe' – now belongs to her slash us.

'Where are we going to put everything?' she goes, even though the real problem is how are we going to fill this pretty much mansion with, like, *our* few possessions?

I end up just shrugging. I'm there, 'Hey, we've got the rest of our lives to fill it, don't we?'

Except she doesn't answer. Like I said, it's a lot to – I'm going to use the word – *process*?

It's some focking pile of bricks, all the same. I've always said it. We're talking fourteen bedrooms, a humungous kitchen, an actual walk-in pantry, three living rooms, two dining rooms, a library, and then fockloads of rooms that aren't actually *anything*? You stick your head around a door and genuinely go, 'I don't think anyone's even *been* in this room since the focking millennium.' You can see why Sorcha's old pair were broken-horted to have to actually sell it.

That's on her mind, too. I know my wife well enough to see that she's feeling for some reason guilty that the gaff is now hers slash mine.

She walks out of the room without saying anything, then I hear her footsteps on the refinished hordwood stairs. I stay where I am, leaning against an, I suppose, windowpane, suddenly thinking about mainly Ronan. To be honest, I barely closed my eyes in the last few nights thinking about him. Fourteen and soon to be a father. You read about these things in the likes of the *Herald* and you presume they're exaggerating, just to sell papers. Then it's suddenly *your* son? I drove straight to Finglas when I heard the news, not a thought for my own welfare. And there was Ro, sitting in front of the horseracing, smoking one of his world-famous rollies, taking it all in his stride – or at least *pretending* to?

'It's a fact,' he went. 'All you can do is deal with it.'

I was like, 'What about school?' which was weak, I know, especially coming from me. What I possibly meant was, what about your childhood? What about your life?

I was there, 'Jesus, Ronan, could you not have been, I don't know, careful?' which, again, was a bit rich. I mean, if *I'd* been careful, there wouldn't even *be* a Ronan. And I can't imagine what the world would be like if that was the case.

Still, the real shock possibly only hit me a couple of hours later, as we were watching Real Gone Kid romp home in the 2.50 at Huntington. For fock's sake, I remember thinking, I'm going to be a grandfather at thirty-one. Jeremy Kyle would kill for an hour of airtime with me.

Ronan just went back to his *Racing Post*, studying the form. 'Like I said,' he went, 'it's a fact now.'

I make the trek upstairs and find Sorcha in her old bedroom. She's, like, staring at the walls, probably trying to decide whether they need a new coat of paint or not. She's become a massive fan lately of adobe as an actual shade.

A memory suddenly comes back to me of us having sex in this room. It might have been the first time we did it in an actual bed – while her old pair were at the National Concert Hall for a performance of Lehár, Tchaikovsky and the Masters of Waltz by the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. It's funny the things you remember, isn't it? I made my exit by way of the window after the two of them arrived home unexpectedly early. Edmund – the dick – had, like, a nosebleed during the interval that basically wouldn't stop. I had to drop, like, twenty feet to the gravel below, then make a run for it. *He* happened to look out the window in time to catch me disappearing down the driveway, still pulling up my chinos. Ever since that night, he's hated me in a way that goes way beyond the normal father-in-law, son-in-law, hey-I'm-rattling-your-daughter vibe.

'Do you think you can do this?' Sorcha suddenly goes.

I'm like, 'As in?'

'As in, do you think you're capable this time? Of being married? Are you prepared to make a proper go of being an actual husband to me?'

'I really do. Yeah, definitely.'

'Because in a month's time, six months' time, a year, I don't want to hear, "She pretty much threw herself at me, Sorcha!" or "Hate the game, Baby, not the player!" or any of your other stupid lines.'

'I've done a lot of growing up, Babes.'

'I expect you to honour the vows that we both took on our wedding day.'

'Okay,' I go, pausing slightly. 'I'll read them.'

She's like, '*Read* them?' Not a happy rabbit.

'What I meant to say was that I'll read them every day.'

'You shouldn't have to read them every day. You took a vow to be faithful to me. Do you think you can remember that?'

'Er, yeah.'

'This time?'

'I'm saying definitely.'

She stares at me for a long time to try to, like, gauge how *serious* I am? I maintain full eye contact with her using a visualization technique I learned kicking points for Castlerock College back in the day. Even though I'm not lying to the girl. I genuinely think I'm possibly ready for this.

She pulls me in for a hug. She smells of vanilla and juniper and maybe one or two other things. After a few seconds, we separate ourselves and I go, 'Have you thought about what *he's* going to say?'

She's like, 'Who?' pretending not to know.

I'm there, 'You *know* who, Sorcha. Your old man. We all have to accept that he's never been a fan of mine. He's always ignored a lot of my genuinely amazing qualities and chosen to focus on the negative stuff. I can't help but wonder what his reaction is going to be when he finds out that I'm back with the apple of his eye – *and* I'm suddenly the master of *his* old house.'

'Why are you smiling, Ross?'

'I wasn't smiling.'

'You smiled. I hope you're not taking some perverse pleasure from this.'

'I'm not.'

'Or, if you are, I hope you'll resist the temptation to show it in front of him.'

'I'll definitely do my best. When are we going to tell him? Tell *them*? We could do it now.'

'We can't,' she goes. 'They're away this week.'

Shit, I forgot. They're in, like, London. Her old man is thinking of going on one of these bankruptcy holidays. Twelve months in purgatory – well, he has a brother in South Kensington, who me and Sorcha have stayed with once or twice – then he can come back to Ireland and stort all over. Jesus. Stort all over. The man is, like, fifty-eight. There's a lot of that about, I suppose.

'It gives me a few days,' she goes, 'to try to get my own head around it. It's going to be a huge adjustment.'

I'm like, 'Not just for us,' suddenly thinking about Honor again. 'God knows what it's going to do to our daughter's life if she can't get mobile phone coverage.'

It's a good line. The girl has been pretty much permanently on Twitter since Nicki Minaj – *actual* Nicki Minaj – favourited a Tweet of hers about something or other. Sorcha smiles – like I said, it's a good line – but then she's suddenly sad.

'What are we going to do about her?' she goes. 'Her behaviour has just become, like, oh my God.'

'I know. A consolation for us should be that we don't have any questions to ask ourselves in terms of how we, like, brought her up and shit?'

Sorcha suddenly doesn't look so sure. She goes, 'We should never have let her be in that film.'

She's talking about the movie that the Hallmork Channel made of my old dear's misery lit book, *Mom, They Said They'd Never Heard of Sundried Tomatoes*. Honor played the lead – little Zara Mesbur – and Sorcha thinks the whole experience went to her head.

'Come on,' I go, 'she was a little wagon before she ever did that movie, let's be honest about that fact.'

I mean, this is a girl who rang Childline and said she was a poverty risk because her mother was managing a Euro discount store in the Powerscourt Townhouse Centre. Sorcha forgets.

'Well, whether she was or not,' she goes, 'I wish we'd never agreed to let her be in that movie. If there was some way of stopping it ever being shown, I would.'

The next thing either of us hears is Honor go, 'Talking about me?'

I end up nearly shitting my pants. She's standing immediately behind us. I'm like, 'Whatever you think you heard, Honor, we didn't mean it.'

It's, like, an *automatic* thing?

Sorcha goes, '*I* meant it,' because she's better at standing up to her than I am. 'I don't like using negative language to you, Honor, but your behaviour recently has fallen way below the standard that we consider acceptable.'

Honor goes, 'In your opinion,' looking her dead in the eye.

'Yes, in my opinion. And your father's.'

I nod, just to let her know that me and her old dear are pretty much a team again.

She's there, 'There's no mobile signal,' like it's something she expects us to instantly fix.

'Look at this beautiful home that you're going to be living in,' Sorcha tries to go. 'There are more important things than your phone, Honor.'

Honor turns her back on us and that's when I hear it. Under her breath, she goes, 'Fock you.'

I've honestly never seen Sorcha look so shocked. I mean, usually you'd have to wait until they're in, like, second or third year in Mount Anville before they say that to you.

I decide it's time to say my piece. 'Honor,' I go, 'possibly don't speak to your mother like that.'

She turns around, her hand on her hip, and goes, 'Er, it's a line in a song?'

'What song?'

'Er, Cee Lo Green?'

I turn around to Sorcha. 'She has us there,' I go. 'It is from a song.'

'Anyhooo,' Honor goes, sounding totally bored with us now, 'I'll be waiting in the car whenever you two are finished whatever it is you're doing. Hashtag – it's been emosh.' And off she trots.

Neither of us says anything for a good, like, thirty seconds. Eventually, roysh – mainly for the want of something to say – I go, 'Ronan's got it all ahead of him. I wouldn't focking envy him.'

Sorcha – totally out of the blue – goes, 'Where are they going to live, Ross?'

I'm like, 'Who?'

'Ronan and Shadden. When the baby arrives.'

'I don't know. I just presumed . . . I don't know what I presumed. I'm driving out to Pram Springs to see *her* old pair tomorrow. There's obviously shit we need to talk about.'

'Because they could live here.'

'Here? With us?'

'Look around you, Ross. Look at all this space we have.'

'I suppose.'

'The baby could have an – oh my God – magical childhood growing up here, full of wonder. Like I did.'

'It'd be great to have Ro here. Jesus, can you imagine the crack?'

'It's, like, *so* an amazing idea. I mean, I'm not being a snob or anything, but there are, like, so many more advantages for children growing up on this side of the city.'

'There's not as much lead in the air – I know that for a fact.'

'And the other beauty of it is that I could look after the baby all day if Ronan and Shadden wanted to finish school. They'd be living in an amazing, amazing house *and* have, like, a full-time, live-in nanny.'

'Like I said, I'd love if they were here.'

'It'd be the solution to – oh my God – so many problems. When are you going to see Shadden's parents again?'

'Tomorrow. Tina's going to be there as well, just to say. It's, like, a summit to discuss the crisis.'

'Well, maybe I'll come as well.'

'You? I wouldn't have thought Finglas would be your kind of place.'

'Someone needs to make the case, Ross, that, okay, this thing has happened – and it's maybe not what everyone envisaged, for Ronan *or* for Shadden – but it could still work out happily for everyone involved.'

'Finglas, though. I mean, what would you even wear?'

'Ross, it doesn't matter what I'm going to wear. What matters is that we let them know that this little baby could have an amazing childhood here in Killiney, growing up in this incredible house, with its mother and father, its grandfather . . .'

The sound of someone leaning on a cor horn snaps us suddenly back to reality.

'And of course Honor,' I go.

Sorcha's like, 'Of course,' looking suddenly sad again. 'Who could forget Honor?'

From outside, we hear the sound of our daughter leaning on the cor horn again. 'Okay, getting bored here,' she shouts. 'Getting very, very bored.'