

The Wrong Kind of Blood

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Extract

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Blood.

The last time, they'd pressed the sharpened points of their sheath-knives into the flesh of their thumbs, and let their blood mingle, and smeared it on each other's foreheads till it looked like burning embers. They were brothers for sure then, bound fast as any natural-born siblings. But embers turn to ashes, and blood doesn't always take.

And look at them now. One is still alive, but barely; the other wishes he had never been born. And look at all that blood. Planning a murder in advance doesn't guarantee that you cut down on blood, although it can help. But when it just happens, in the heat of rage and with the available means to hand – a wrench that can smash a mouthful of teeth, open up an eye socket, splinter a cheekbone; a screwdriver that will gouge through gristle and nerve, puncture liver and spleen, sluice blood from a torn throat – when murder just happens, you wouldn't believe how much blood there can be.

Forensic scientists classify bloodstains under six separate headings: drops, splashes, spurts, trails, smears and pools. And they're all here: drops on the stone floor, splashes on the walls, spurts on the striplight and across the ceiling, trails as the dying man tries to evade his killer, smears on the car bonnet and the garage door, and at the end of it all, the wine dark pool of blood seeping out beneath the dead man.

The murderer cries, weeps at what he has done: involuntary tears, a spasm, not of remorse, but of shock, of relief, of exhilaration at the brave new world he has wrought, a world with one man fewer living in it. He wipes the tears with the backs of his hands, the sweat from his brow, the snot from his streaming nose. His breath still comes in sharp, shuddering gusts, like sobs. He sinks to his knees, leans his head back, shuts his eyes.

Look at him now. Look at his face: blood matted around his hairline, in his eyebrows, in his moustache; blood collecting in the folds of his neck and in his ears; blood anointing him the chosen one, the first murderer, his brother's killer. Look at the happy savage, who's discovered the fatal flaw in God's creation: if Cain could rise up against Abel and slay him, what's to stop the rest of us?

I

*What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth
unto me from the ground.*

Genesis 4:10

I

The night of my mother's funeral, Linda Dawson cried on my shoulder, put her tongue in my mouth and asked me to find her husband. Now she was lying dead on her living-room floor, and the howl of a police siren echoed through the surrounding hills. Linda had been strangled: a froth of blood brimmed from her mouth, and her bloodshot eyes bulged. The marks around her neck were barely perceptible, suggesting the murder weapon had been a scarf or a silk tie. Cyanosis had given her already livid skin a bluish tone, deepest at the lips and ears, and on the fingernails of her hands, which were clenched into small fists. They lay stiff in her lap, and her eyes gaped unseeingly through the glass wall towards the sky; her corpse looked like some grotesque parody of the undertaker's art.

The siren's howl reached a deafening crescendo and then stopped. As the car doors slammed, as the Guards stomped up the drive and began to pound on the front door, my eyes looked out past Linda's, out at the grey morning sky, then down along the cliffside, down between the stands of spruce and pine, down among the great Georgian houses, the Victorian castles and modern villas of Castlehill, down to where this all began, barely a week ago.



We were standing on the terrace of the Bayview Hotel, watching a bloated old moon hoist itself slowly above the sea. Out

in Dublin bay, the city lights flickered in the haze. Across the road, framed by gorse thatched cliffs and a scrubby pebble beach, the railway station stood deserted, the signal stuck on red. Everyone else who had been at the funeral had gone home, and I was waiting for Linda to finish her drink so I could drive her home. But Linda didn't want to go home. She untied her hair and shook it down, then back from her face. She narrowed her dark eyes, forced her brow into a frown and set her red lips in a small pout, as if, all things considered, she definitely agreed with what she was about to say.

'I can't take it,' she said. 'I can't take another night on my own in that house.'

Something in my eyes must have warned her that now was not necessarily the best time to be making her problems my problems.

'Oh Ed, I'm sorry,' she said. 'Tonight of all nights, this is the last thing you need.' She began to cry suddenly, deflatedly, like a lost child too sad to panic. I took her in my arms and lent her my shoulder. The sea was silver grey beneath the moon, and it glistened like wet granite. The railway signal changed from red to amber. A mild breeze blew the clean balm of eucalyptus up from the hotel garden below. I could feel Linda's cold cheek brush my neck, and then her warm lips were on mine, and she was kissing me. I kissed her back, and then moved her cheek alongside mine and held her. Her body went rigid for a moment, then she tapped me twice on the back, like a wrestler ready to submit. We separated, and she finished her drink, dabbed her eyes and lit a cigarette.

'I'm sorry.'

'No need to apologize.'

'It's just . . . I'm really worried about Peter.'

Peter Dawson was Linda's husband. I'd been at school with Linda; her husband had been a child of three when I left

Ireland. I hadn't seen either of them for over twenty years. Kissing another man was an unorthodox way of expressing concern for your husband, but then Linda had always been known for doing exactly as she pleased, and nothing I could see in her face or figure suggested much had changed, in that regard at least.

'You said he was away on business.'

'I don't know where he is. He's been gone four days now. He hasn't called me, they haven't heard from him at work.'

'Have you told the police?'

'No, we . . . I didn't want to.'

'Why not?'

'I suppose . . . I suppose I thought the police would make the whole thing more real, somehow. And I've been half expecting Peter to just walk back in the house as if nothing had happened.'

A fresh drink suddenly materialized in Linda's hand; she must have snagged a waitress by means I didn't notice – or understand. I gave in, ordered a large Jameson from the girl and lit one of Linda's cigarettes.

'You say that as if it's happened before. Has Peter disappeared like this in the past?'

'Not for four days. But occasionally . . . well, we do have the odd row. And Peter's favourite response has always been to storm out. You know how marriage is. Or do you? It's been so long, I don't know if you . . . I don't really know very much about your life, Edward Loy.'

'I was married, yes.'

'And?'

'It didn't take.'

'Were there children?'

'A little girl.'

‘I suppose she’s with her mother? You must miss her. But of course you do, what a stupid thing to say.’

An express train crashed out of the cliffside tunnel and blazed through the station. The carriages were brightly lit, and crammed with passengers. I wished I was one of them, and that I was on that train now, hurtling into the night.

My whiskey arrived. I splashed some water into it and knocked half of it back.

Linda was still talking.

‘Tommy Owens was saying he visited you out there.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought you kept up with Tommy Owens.’

‘I saw him in Hennessy’s the other night. And no, I don’t go there much either, just when I’m feeling . . . even more trapped than usual.’

‘Hennessy’s. Is it still the same dump?’

‘Whatever you want, you can get it in Hennessy’s. God knows how they never closed the place.’

‘We used to think Hennessy had a friend high up in the cops.’

‘If he has a friend. Anyway, Tommy said you found people who were missing. You helped a family find their daughter.’

‘I did some work for a guy who traced missing persons.’

‘Well, I just thought . . . and I know you must be in bits with your Mum and everything, but if you could even have a think about it, Ed, I’d really, really appreciate it.’

In case I didn’t understand just how she might show her appreciation, Linda moistened her lips with her tongue, wrinkled her button nose a little, and threaded an arm around my waist. Her breath smelt yeasty and sweet, and her scent was all grapefruit and smoke and summer sweat. I wanted to kiss her again, and was just about to, when her drink slipped from her hand and smashed. It left a jagged, gleaming scrawl on the terrace flagstones. With the charmed timing of the

accomplished drinker, Linda turned, caught the waitress's eye and, flashing a wry smile of expiation, summoned a replacement. I quickly waved some semaphore of my own, and began to persuade Linda that it was about time to bring the day to a close. She was still very thirsty, and took some persuading, so I had to remind her that it had been my mother we had buried that morning, and she began to cry again, and apologize, but finally I got her down the front steps of the hotel. We crunched along the gravel drive, past rows of palm and yucca. Eucalyptus loomed at either side, and fat sumacs squatted on the lawn. There wasn't a native tree in sight. Linda sat into the passenger seat of my hire car, and we drove in silence along the coast road past Bayview village. The coconut musk of gorse was thick in the warm night air. It smelt like incense, and I had a flash of the church that morning, of the seething thurible glinting in the light, of the coffin and the cross and the faces in the pews, faces I half remembered but knew I must know.

*Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.*

I turned inland by the Martello tower, cut through the old pine forest and began the climb up Castlehill Road. Near the top, Linda juddered into sudden life.

‘Next left here, Ed.’

Just before we reached Castlehill village, I swung the car down a granite-walled slip road and halted in front of a set of black security gates. Linda ran her window down and pressed some digits on a credit card-sized keypad she took from her purse. The gates swung open and she pointed to the furthest of the five new detached white houses in the development. I parked in front of the deco-styled property, which had curved exterior walls, a carport, a large back garden and a

view reaching from the mountains to the bay. The barred gates swung slowly shut behind us.

‘Nice,’ I said.

‘Peter’s father built them.’

‘Must feel safe up here.’

‘Sometimes I wonder whether the gates are to keep intruders out, or to keep us in.’

‘It’s hard being rich.’

Linda smiled. ‘I wasn’t complaining. But the last thing you feel is safe.’

Her smile, which hadn’t reached her eyes, vanished. She looked frightened, and the moonlight flooding through the windscreen showed the lines in her tired face.

‘About Peter . . . and I know this is not the right time, Ed –’

‘Tell me what makes you so worried about him. What do you think has happened?’

‘I don’t know. I . . . come in for a drink, will you? Or a coffee.’

‘No thanks. Tell me about your husband.’

A silver Persian cat had emerged from the dark, and was padding from house to house, setting a searchlight off on each front lawn as he went. He looked like he was doing it on purpose, out of badness.

‘Peter’s been in trouble for a while now. I think he’s being blackmailed.’

‘Over what?’

‘I don’t know. There’ve been phone calls. People hanging up when I answer.’

‘An affair?’

Linda shook her head.

‘I’m pretty sure it’s a money thing. A business thing.’

‘How is the business?’

‘Are you kidding? Have you not heard about our great property boom?’

‘Just a little. Prices have shot up, right?’

‘They’re still shooting. These houses here have doubled in value in the five years since they were built. It’s wild.’

I had barely been forty-eight hours in Dublin, and quite a few of those hours had been spent either in the funeral home or in the church, but Linda must have been the fifteenth person to reassure me about the vibrancy of the local property market. It was like being trapped at an estate agent’s convention. Everyone took care not to appear too triumphalist; the boom was spoken of as an unbidden but welcome blessing, like the recent stretch of unexpectedly good weather. But boasting was boasting, however you tried to dress it up. At least Linda had the excuse that her father-in-law, John Dawson, was one of the city’s biggest builders. Cranes bearing the Dawson name seemed to be trampling at will all over Bayview and Seafield; I could see three from where we sat. My first view coming in on the plane wasn’t of the coast or the green fields of North Dublin; it was of four great Dawson cranes suspended above a vast oval construction site. It looked like they had just dug up the Parthenon, and were laying the foundations for another shopping mall.

‘Peter’s the company accountant?’

‘Financial controller, they call it. Same difference.’

‘So if business is booming, what’s his problem? Gambling? Drugs?’

‘Gambling, I doubt. Drugs, occasionally. But for fun. No more than anyone else we know. He’s not an addict. He probably drinks too much. But I’m no-one to talk.’

‘So what did he need money for?’

‘He said something about having to be “ready for opportunities as they arose”. I don’t know what he meant.’

‘Has he any other business interests?’

‘A few apartments dotted around the city. Tax-incentive investments. They’re let through a property agency. And a bunch of stocks and shares, a whatdoyoucallit, portfolio. Although maybe he’s cashed them in. He was in a panic, like a controlled panic, the last few times I saw him.’

‘A controlled panic?’

‘I know, aren’t we all? I know it sounds a bit vague, but . . .’
She shrugged, and let her words trail away.

‘When was he last seen?’

‘He went on-site at the Seafield County Hall renovation on Friday last. He had to go through the budget with the project manager, then he was due to meet me for a drink in the High Tide. I was about twenty minutes late, by which time Peter had gone. I haven’t seen him since.’

‘Does he have a cell phone?’

‘A mobile? It just rings off.’

A swollen, dark-tanned blond man in a white towelling robe appeared in his doorway and waved his fat hands at the silver cat, who ignored him. The man padded to the edge of his driveway, folded his pudgy arms across his belly and frowned across at my car. I returned his frown until he broke eye contact. When he saw Linda, he turned and retreated into his house, red-faced and breathing deeply from his night’s work.

‘Fucking busybody,’ Linda said. ‘It was his idea to have the gates built, but since they went up, the fall of a leaf has him rustling his curtains or lumbering down his drive. Try and give a party, he’s reporting every strange car to the police.’

‘How are things between Peter and his father, Linda? Do they get along?’

‘They don’t see a great deal of each other. John Dawson doesn’t concern himself with the day to day much any more. Only time he ventures out in public is to race meetings.’

Otherwise, he's like a recluse, himself and Barbara, rattling around that huge house at the top of Castlehill.'

'So no great father and son rivalry?'

'Not really. Not that Barbara hasn't tried to drum some up. She's always said Peter should have made his own way, that his father had come from nothing and made it to the top, that Peter had it easy all his life. At least his father didn't have to put up with you as a mother, I always want to reply.'

'I saw Barbara at the removal. She looks well for her age.'

'She's discovered the secret of eternal youth. Goes to a clinic in the States every summer, comes back looking five years younger.'

'Did Peter take what his mother said to heart?'

'I think so. I know it hurt him. And maybe . . . I mean, buying the apartments and things, that's only recent . . . maybe that's an attempt to strike out on his own. His "opportunities". But for God's sake, he's only twenty-five years old, I mean, give him a chance, you know?'

'Anything else you can think of?'

'Well. That Friday. Peter and I were actually meeting to . . . Talk About Things, you know?'

'What, a divorce?'

'God, no. Maybe a . . . a trial separation, isn't that what we used to call it? Back in the days when we were young, and it didn't really matter. But Peter still *is* so young. Which is great in some ways,' said Linda, baring her teeth in a hungry grin which left me in no doubt which ways she meant.

'But outside the bedroom?' I said.

'Outside the bedroom, we had nothing left to say to each other.'

The silver cat settled in Linda's porch and began to howl. Linda turned to me and took my arm.

'Can you find Peter?'

‘I don’t know. To start with, I’d need his bank and phone records and a bunch of other stuff. But the truth is, most likely, he doesn’t want to be found.’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘No, I don’t. But adults who go missing, it’s usually because they want to. And if they don’t want to be found, well, it can be very difficult. But I’ll think about it. OK?’

Linda leant across and kissed my cheek, and crinkled her face into a smile, as if to reassure me she was being brave. Then, having agreed that we’d talk again in the morning, she got out of the car and walked up her drive. The cat leapt to his feet and rubbed himself against her slender, black-stockinged calf. She pointed at the security gates to open, and I turned the car and headed back up the slip road. In the rearview mirror, I could see Linda in her doorway, smoking a cigarette. When I made the turn onto Castlehill Road, she was still standing there, moonlight pale on her face, her bright hair wreathed in smoke. Her sweet smell clung to my skin, and her salt taste to my lips, and I realized how much I’d wanted her all evening, how much I still wanted her now. I gripped the wheel and hit the gas and drove away without looking back.