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The Glorious Heresies

Written by Lisa McInerney

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The Glorious Heresies

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JOHN MURRAY

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This, like everything else, is for John

The Dead Man

I

He left the boy outside its own front door. Farewell to it, and good luck to it. He wasn't going to feed it anymore; from here on in it would be squared shoulders and jaws, and strong arms and best feet forward. He left the boy a pile of mangled, skinny limbs and stepped through the door a newborn man, stinging a little in the sights of the sprite guiding his metamorphosis. Karine D'Arcy was her name. She was fifteen and a bit and had been in his class for the past three years. Outside of school she consistently outclassed him, and yet here she was, standing in his hall on a Monday lunchtime. And so the boy had to go, what was left of him, what hadn't been flayed away by her hands and her kisses.

'You're sure your dad won't come home?' she said.

'He won't,' he said, though his father was a law unto himself and couldn't be trusted to follow reason. This morning he'd warned that he'd be out and about, so the kids would have to make their own dinner, though he'd be back later, trailing divilment and, knowing the kindness of the pit, a foul temper.

'What if he does, though?'

He took his hand from hers and slipped it round her waist.

'I don't know,' he said. Oh, the truth was raw, as raw as you could get, unrehearsed words from a brand-new throat.

He was fifteen, only just. If she'd asked him the same question back before they'd crossed this threshold he would have answered according to fifteen years' build-up of boyish bravado, but now that everything had changed he couldn't remember how to showboat.

'It'll be my fault anyway,' he said. 'Not yours.'

They were supposed to be in school, and even his dad would know it. If he came home now, *if*, all lopsided with defeat, the worse for wear because of drink, or poker or whatever the fuck, it'd still take him only a moment to figure out that his son was on the lang, and for one reason only.

'Here it'd be yours,' she said. 'But what if he told my mam and dad?'

'He wouldn't.' It was as certain as the floor beneath them. His father was many things, but none of them responsible. Or bold. Or righteous.

'Are you sure?'

'The only people my dad talks to live here,' he said. 'No one else would have him.'

'So what do we do now?'

The name of this brave new man, still stinging from the possibilities whipping his flesh and pushing down on his shoulders, was Ryan. In truth, his adult form wasn't all that different to the gawky corpse he'd left outside; he was still black-haired and pale-skinned and ink-eyed. 'You look like you're *possessed*,' shivered one of the girls who'd gotten close enough to judge; she then declared her intent to try sucking the demon out through his tongue. He was stretching these past few months. *Too slow, too steady*, his nonna had sighed, the last time she'd perused his Facebook photos. She was adamant he'd never hit six feet. His mother was four years dead and his father was a wreck who slept as often on the couch as he did in his own bed. Ryan was the oldest of the wreck's children. He tiptoed around his father and made up for it around everyone else.

Something didn't fit about that. Of course, men of any age were entitled to flake around the place giving digs to anyone who looked like they might slight them, and that was certainly how the wreck behaved: hollow but for hot, cheap rage, dancing between glory and drying-out sessions in miserable rehab centres a million miles from anywhere. Even when Ryan dredged up the frenzies required by teachers' scorn or challenges thrown down by bigger kids, he knew there was something very empty in the way the lot

of them encouraged him to fight. He'd been on the lookout for something to dare him to get out of bed in the morning, but he'd never thought it could have been her.

She was part of that group of girls who wore their skirts the shortest and who commandeered the radiator perches before every class and who could glide between impertinence and saccharine familiarity with teachers. He'd never thought she would look at him as anything but a scrapper, though he'd been asking her to, silently, behind his closed mouth and downturned eyes, for *fucking years*.

Three weeks before, on the night of his birthday, she had let him kiss her.

He'd been in one of his friends' cars – they were older than him, contemporaries of his sixteen-year-old cousin Joseph, who knew enough about Ryan to excuse his age – when he'd spotted her standing outside the doors of the community centre disco, laughing and trembling in a long black top and white shorts. He'd leant up from the back seat and called her from the passenger window, and he didn't even have to coax to get her clambering in beside him. Dumb luck that she was in the mood for a spin. And yet, a leap in his chest that tempted him to believe that maybe it was more again: dumb luck and trust. She trusted him. She – Jesus! – *liked* him.

They'd gone gatting. There were a couple of cans and a couple of joints and a cold, fair wind that brought her closer to his side. When he'd realised he couldn't medicate the nerves, he'd owned up to how he felt about her by chancing a hand left on the small of her back, counting to twenty or thirty or eighty before accepting she wasn't going to move away, taking her hand to steady his own and then finally, finally, over the great distance of thirty centimetres, he caught her mouth on his and kissed her.

In the days that followed they had covered miles of new ground and decided to chance making a go of it. They had gone to the pictures, they had eaten ice cream, they had meandered at the end of each meeting back to her road, holding hands. And lest they laid foundations too wholesome, they had found quiet spaces and

dark corners in which to crumble that friendship, his palms recording the difference between the skin on her waist and on her breasts, his body pushing against hers so he could remember how her every hollow fit him.

Now, in his hall on a Monday lunchtime, he answered with a question.

'What do you want to do?'

She stepped into the sitting room and spun on one foot, taking it all in. He didn't need to stick his head through the frame to know that the view was found wanting. His father's ineptitude had preserved the place as a museum to his mother's homemaking skills, and she had been as effective with clutter as the wind was with blades of grass.

'I've never been in your house,' she said. 'It's weird.'

She meant her presence in it, and not the house itself. Though she wouldn't have been far wrong; it was weird. It was a three-bedroom terrace so cavernous without his mother he could barely stand it. It echoed shit he didn't want to think about in chasms that shouldn't have been there. It was a roof over his head. It was a fire hazard, in that he thought sometimes he could douse it in fuel and take a match to it and watch it take the night sky with it.

She knew the score. He'd admitted his circumstances in a brave move only a couple of days before, terrified that she'd lose it and dump him, and yet desperate to tell her that not every rumour about his father was true. On the back steps of the school, curled together on cold concrete, he'd confessed that yeah, he clashed with his dad, but no, not in the way that some of the more spiteful storytellers hinted at. *He's an eejit, girl, there's only the weight in him to stay upright when he's saturated, but he's not . . . He's . . . I've heard shit that people have said but he's not warped, girl. He's just . . . fucking . . . I don't know.*

She hadn't run off and she hadn't told anyone. It was both a load off and the worst play he could have made, for it cemented his place on his belly on the ground in front of her. On one hand he didn't mind because he knew she was better than him – she

was whip-smart and as beautiful as morning and each time he saw her he felt with dizzying clarity the blood in his veins and the air in his lungs and his heart beating strong in his chest – but then it pissed him off that he couldn't approach her on his own two feet. That he was no more upright now than his father. That uselessness was hereditary.

There was no anger now, though. He had left it outside the front door with his wilting remains.

She held out her hand for his.

'You gonna play for me?'

His mam's piano stood by the wall, behind the door. It could just as easily have been his. He'd put the hours in, while she fought with his dad or threatened great career changes or fought with the neighbours or threatened to gather him and his siblings and stalk back to her parents. She used to pop him onto the piano stool whenever she needed space to indulge her cranky fancies, and in so doing had left him with ambidexterity and the ability to read sheet music. Not many people knew that about him, because they'd never have guessed.

He could play for Karine D'Arcy, if he wanted to. Some classical piece he could pretend was more than just a practice exercise, or maybe one of the pop songs his mother had taught him when she was finding sporadic employment with wedding bands and singing in hotel lobbies during shitty little arts festivals. It might even work. Karine might be so overwhelmed that she might take all her clothes off and let him fuck her right there on the sitting-room floor.

Something empty about that fantasy, too. The reality is that she was here in his house on a Monday lunchtime, a million zillion years from morphing into a horny stripper. That's what he had to deal with: Karine D'Arcy really-really being here.

He didn't want to play for her. Anticipation would make knuckles of his fingertips.

'I might do later,' he said.

'Later?'

He might have looked deep into her eyes and crooned *Yeah,*

later, if he'd had more time to get used to his new frame. Instead he smiled and looked away and muddled together *Later* and *After* in his head. *I might do After. We have this whole house to ourselves to make better.* There was going to be an After. He knew it.

She walked past him and out into the kitchen, and looked out the back window at the garden and its dock-leafed lawn laid out between stubby walls of concrete block. She flexed her hands against the sink, and pushed back her shoulders as she stretched onto tiptoes.

'It's weird,' she said again. 'To have never been in this house until now. You and me have been friends for so long, like.'

It had been an anxious kind of friendship. There were school projects and parties and play-fighting and one time a real fight during which he had accused her of only hanging out with him to get access to those parties. It was during that outburst of impotent temper, between off-white walls in a wide school corridor, that he realised their closeness amounted to years of her dragging him along like a piece of broken rock in a comet's tail.

It hit him like a midwife's slap that if it wasn't for his house being so cavernous, if it wasn't for his dad traipsing the city looking for cheap drink and indifferent company, if it wasn't for the fact that scrappers cared little for mitching off school, she wouldn't be here with him now, offering him the possibility of removing the burden of friendship and at least some of his clothes. Karine D'Arcy looked back at him with one hand on the draining board, rearranging the kitchen by way of chemical reaction, bleak snapshots fizzling against her butter-blonde hair and popping like soap bubbles against the hem of her grey school skirt. The house looked different with her here, on his side. She didn't know the history in every room and every jagged edge. The bottom step of the stairs. The coffee table that was always there, just so, to trip him up whenever he was shoved into the front room. The kitchen wall, the spot by the back door, where he'd watched the light switch from an inch away with one cheek pressed against eggshell blue and his dad's weight condensed into a hand flat on his left temple trying to push him right through the plaster.

'You're beautiful,' he told her, and she laughed and blinked and said, 'God, where did that come from?'

'You are,' he said. 'What are you doing here?'

She nestled against his neck. *Missing Geography*, she might have said. But she didn't say anything and the longer her silence went on the closer they got to the stairs, to his bed, to whatever came after that.

He hated his bedroom marginally less than he hated the rest of the house. He shared it with his brothers Cian and Cathal, who were messier than he was. The space was laid out in a Venn diagram; no matter how loudly he roared or how gingerly he protected what was his from what was theirs, they always managed to arrange an overlap. She sat on his bed – gratifying that she knew which was his – and he kicked his way around the floor, sending Dinky cars and Lego and inside-out pyjama bottoms under beds and into corners.

She was sitting on her hands and so when they kissed it was as if they'd never kissed before and weren't entirely sure whether they'd like it. The second one was better. She reached to cradle his face. The side of her finger brushed against the back of his ear. He pushed her school jumper over her breasts and when she pulled back to take it off he copied her.

'Maybe,' she said, three buttons down, 'like, we should close out the door. Just in case.'

'I could pull one of the beds in front of it?'

'Yeah.'

He pulled the curtains too. They lay on his bed and held each other, and kissed, and more clothes came off, and all the way along he kept thinking that she was going to withdraw her approval, that his hands would betray him here as he worried they would on the piano keys.

She didn't. She kissed him back and pressed against him and helped him. And he wondered, if he could do this with her in every room would it sanctify the place, exorcise it of the echoes of words spat and each jarring thump recorded against each solid surface?

He wondered if he should stop wondering, when a wandering mind was heresy.

'Just be careful,' she whispered. 'Oh please, Ryan, be careful.'

She clasped her hands around his neck and he found his right hand on her left knee, gently pushing out and oh fuck, that was it, he was totally done for.

Cork City isn't going to notice the first brave steps of a resolute little man. The city runs on the macro: traffic jams, All-Ireland finals, drug busts, general elections. Shit to complain about: the economy, the Dáil, whatever shaving of Ireland's integrity they were auctioning off to mainland Europe this week.

But Monday lunchtime was the whole world to one new man, and probably a thousand more besides, people who spent those couple of hours getting promotions or pregnancy tests or keys to their brand-new second-hand cars. There were people dying, too. That's the way of the city: one new man to take the place of another, bleeding out on a polished kitchen floor.

Maureen had just killed a man.

She didn't mean to do it. She'd barely need to prove that, she thought; no one would look at a fifty-nine-year-old slip of a whip like her and see a killer. When you saw them on the telly, the broken ones who tore asunder all around them, they always looked a bit off. Too much attention from handsy uncles, too few green vegetables. Faces like bags of triangles and eyes like buttons on sticks. Pass one on the street and you'd be straight into the Gardaí, suggesting that they tail the lurching loon if they were looking for a promotion to bring home to the mammy in Ballygobackwards. Well, not Maureen. Her face had a habit of sliding into a scowl between intentional expressions, but looking like a string of piss wasn't enough to have Gardaí probing your perversions. There'd have been no scandals in the Church at all, she thought, if the Gardaí had ever had minds honed so.

She looked at the man face-down on the tiles. There was blood under him. It gunged into the grout. It'd need wire wool.

Bicarbonate of soda. Bleach. Probably something stronger; she wasn't an expert. She didn't usually go around on cat feet surprising intruders with blunt force trauma. This was a first for her.

She was shit at cleaning, too. Homemaking skills were for good girls and it was forty years since anyone had told her she was one of them.

He was definitely dead, whoever he was. He wore a once-black jumper and a pair of shiny tracksuit bottoms. The back of his head was cracked and his hair matted, but it had been foxy before that. A tall man, a skinny rake, another string of piss, now departed. She hadn't gotten a look at his face before she flaked him with the Holy Stone and she couldn't bring herself to turn him over. It'd be like turning a chop on a grill, the thought of which turned her stomach. She'd hardly eat now. What if his eyes were still open?

There was no question of ringing for the guards. She did think – her face by now halfway to her ankles – that it might be jolly to ring for a priest, just to see how God and his bandits felt about it. Maybe they'd try to clean the kitchen floor by blessing it, *by the power vested in me*. But she didn't think she'd be able for inviting one of them fellas over the threshold. Two invasions in a day? She didn't have the bleach.

She turned from the dead man to pick up her phone.

Jimmy had drawn priests down upon her like seagulls to the bridge in bad weather. He was sin, poor thing, conceived in it and then the mark of it, growing like all bad secrets until he stretched her into a shape no one could shut their eyes to.

If she'd been born a decade earlier, she reckoned giving birth out of wedlock would have landed her a life sentence scrubbing linens in a chemical haze, hard labour twice over to placate women of God and feather their nests. But there was enough space in the seventies to allow her room to turn on her heel and head for England, where she was, on and off, until the terrible deed she'd named James tracked her down again with his own burden to show her.

Some women had illegitimate babies who grew up to be

accountants, or teachers, or heirs to considerable acres of good ground in the midlands. Not Maureen.

She frowned at the blood on the floor and dialled. Jimmy would know what to do. This was exactly the kind of thing he was good at.